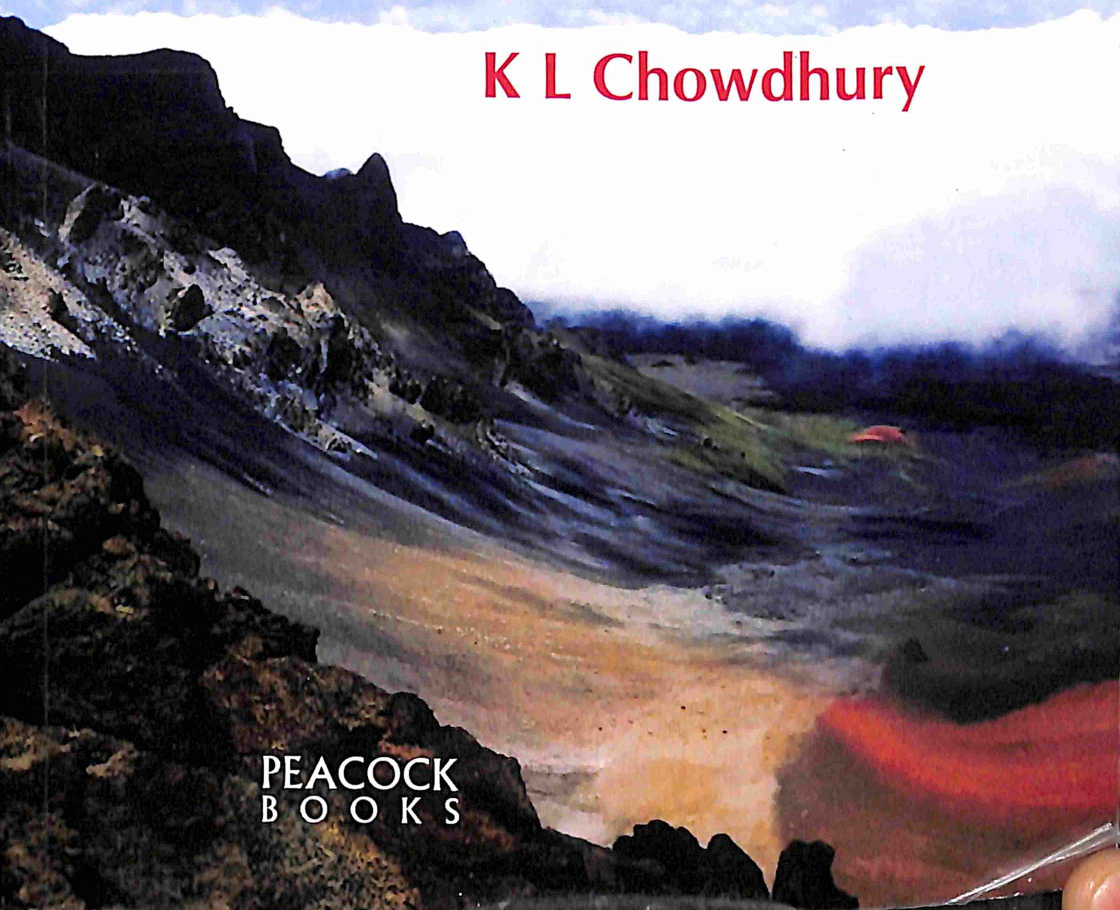
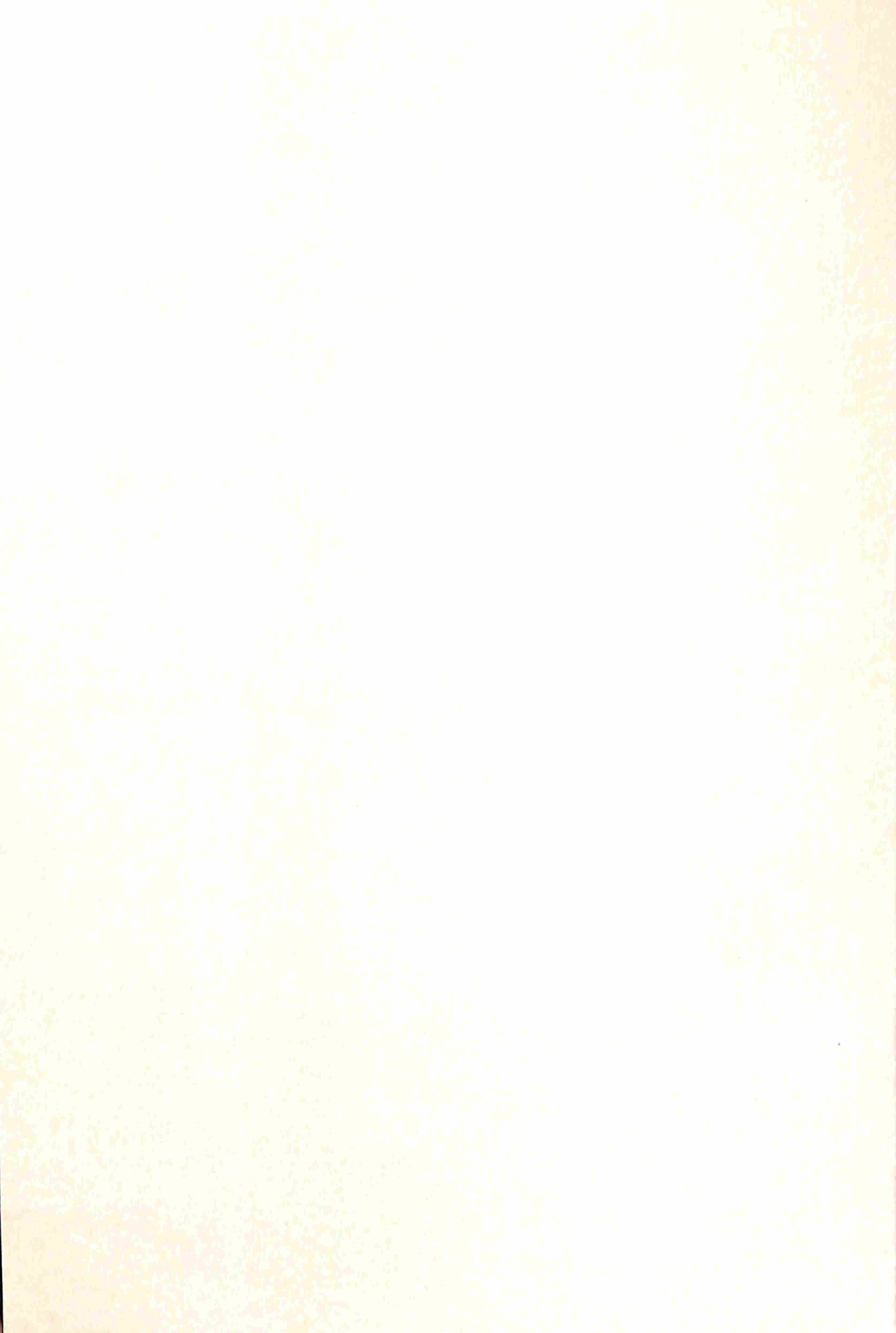
The Final Frontier

Dialogues between Mother and Son

K L Chowdhury



PEACOCK BOOKS



THE FINAL FRONTIER

(Dialogues Between Mother and Son)

For KN Pandita Sahib
With great regards
&
Congrats on your
Padma Award

KLC

K L Chowdhury



PEACOCK BOOKS

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To Mother, the eternal fount of love

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- *Why Don't You Convert and other Short Stories*

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I am grateful to my little brother, Bodhji (Surinder), for his insightful suggestions and meticulous editing of the manuscript.

The poem, There Has To Be More, was penned by my daughter, Tingli (Renuka), while on her short visit to India to meet her ailing grandmother. She lovingly agreed to let me include it in this collection.

This odyssey would not have been possible without the deep understanding and unstinted support that I received from my wife, Leela, all through.

The City of Brahman

In the city of Brahman is a secret dwelling, the lotus of the heart. As great as the infinite space beyond is the space within the lotus of the heart. Both heaven and earth are contained in that inner space, both fire and air, sun and moon, lightning and stars....

Never fear that old age will invade that city; never fear that this inner treasure of all reality will wither and decay. This knows no age when the body ages; this knows no dying when the body dies. This is the real city of Brahman; this is the Self, free from old age, from death and grief, hunger and thirst. In the Self all desires are fulfilled.

(*The Chandogya Upanishad*)

Introduction

There is one question my elderly patients often ask: Is ageing a disease, decay, or state of mind? I give them a stock answer: It is all the three together in different proportions in different people.

They say you are only as old as you feel and those who feel younger tend to live longer. However, we also know that with advancing years there is a slow decay of every system in the body—a senescence of the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, and other organs including bones, joints, muscles, and the skin and its appendages. We start losing function of our organs and systems at an annual average of about one percent beginning with the fourth decade, or thereabouts, in a slow and invisible process that generally goes unnoticed because the body is provided with ample reserves and has amazing potential to acclimatize to the changes and challenges.

Some people age gracefully. They stay independent and retain their mental faculties till the very end. They retain their charm and negotiate the problems of ageing with dignity and equanimity. But, there are others who fall prey to disability, disease, and dementia. They tend to forget people and places, time and spaces, words and speech. It is these less fortunate ones who need care and compassion till the very end.

As a medical professional with five decades of experience, I have been grappling with the manifold problems of ageing in my patients—stroke, failing heart, parkinsonism, dementia, asthma, crippling arthritis, depression, terminal cancer, and

other end-of-life situations. I have been intimately involved in helping them tide over the many crises as they battle through the last lap of their earthly sojourn. But, when it came to my own mother, I experienced the problems in an altogether different light. The difference between issuing instructions to the caregivers and being a caregiver, between the practice of treating a patient and the challenges of treating one's own parent, became starkly clear.

Mother had been enduring numerous challenges of life with stoicism, courage, and grace. She had a long history of infirmities—impaired hearing from a long-standing otosclerosis; residual right facial paralysis following ear surgery; postural and gait disorders after surgery for a spinal tumour; anxiety and depression from cumulative factors including our forced exodus from Kashmir; spastic colon and irritable bladder.

Despite the problems, she retained her mental sharpness and lived a happy and contended life, taking regular strolls in the garden, reading the Hindu epics, watching TV, doing her daily puja, chanting mantras, reciting devotional poetry, doing ordinary chores, and taking interest in family matters. Endowed with a fantastic memory, and being a born story teller, she loved to communicate and participate in family discussions. She took great interest in current affairs, wrote letters to her kin, and made regular phone calls. No infirmity, no handicap, no pain could dampen her urge and enthusiasm for life. She had a great fund of inner joy and peace, and had struck a perfect equilibrium and equipoise between her inner and outer world.

Alas, this was not going to last forever. She was struck by age-related macular degeneration that caused her significant visual impairment and slowed her down. She yet managed

to take care of herself without any help, making the best of the residual eyesight. She insisted on doing things by herself even as she was being dissuaded, lest she sustain a fall. She had an infinite capacity to roll back and a strong will to be on her own.

It was this determination which possibly landed her in trouble. She tripped over and sustained a hairline foot fracture while on her morning stroll in the lawn. Even as the fracture united, she was left with an unsure foot and became more unsteady. Gradually, we had to take over some of her daily chores related to self-care, and her dependence on us for many functions went on increasing from one day to another. The turning point came when her bladder irritability grew worse, forcing her to make frequent visits to the toilet and spending much time there. We insisted on a walker which she refused for long, but it did not stop the final fall when she fractured her hip in one of the toilet excursions.

There was no looking back after that fall as she became bedridden, and the whole paradigm of care-giving changed. Her cognitive functions took a nosedive and a host of new problems cropped up—at once challenging and poignant, sometimes frustrating and demoralizing. The experience of looking after her and taking care of her daily needs during the last four years of her life unfolded for me new visions and vistas of care-giving. It helped me realize that all my medical knowledge and experience of treating a large population of geriatric patients fell woefully short. It forged a better understanding of ageing and age-related problems, and brought to the fore the existential, psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of tending to an aged and challenged person, confined to bed, waiting for deliverance. It transformed me as a doctor, care-giver, and a human being.

During these times, while I juggled between the three roles of a professional doctor, a family man, and a care-giving son, there were times I suffered a burnout. I tried meditation but could not concentrate. I found it easier to snatch the moments to record in small poems my dialogues with mother, real and imaginary, which revolved around her life experiences, her uncomplaining suffering, my own feelings and thoughts, and the pain of watching her melt away. This proved to be an exercise in self-introspection, besides being therapeutic for my tortured soul. In the process, it also brought out some of her remarkable aphorisms about life. It is these dialogues and musings which I like to share with the readers that they may find an echo of their own experiences in similar situations and, possibly, take heart from my experience.

I feel this collection encapsulates the inscrutability of ageing and age-related problems which have befuddled doctors, psychologists, poets, and philosophers ever since the beginning of time.

The poems are presented as intimate dialogues between a mother and son, some real and some imaginary. As mother's cognition suffers an inevitable decline, she turns incommunicado for long intervals and I endeavour to fathom the language through her eyes that follow me, vaguely at times, and the dialogues peter out into soliloquy and silence.

K L Chowdhury

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Section Two—Soliloquies

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Section One—Dialogues

Prayer

Mother,
be it morning, be it evening
I find you absorbed in prayer.
Pray what do you say to your gods?
What boons do you ask for?
What favours do you seek?

No boons do I seek,
no favours, my son.
I pray for health and happiness
for my children and my kin;
peace, amity, and prosperity
for all humanity;
and, for those who left us,
a place in heaven
if there is one.

As for myself,
I ask Yama to take me
while I am still hale and hearty.
And, when it is time
for the final journey,
I pray for you to be there
to lend me your shoulder.

(25 October, 2007)

Memories

Mother,
pray what are you thinking about
sitting up in your bed,
when you should be in the *puja* room
for your daily morning prayer?

Thinking of Kashmir, my son,
and all the years we lived there.
Now it looks like a distant dream,
water down the river.

Why should we burden ourselves
for a place we were exiled from?
How does it gain us
thinking of days bygone
when life urges us to move on?

We may have been uprooted
and exiled from there, my son;
yet can we forget our roots,
can we sever the spiritual bonds?
Kashmir will always live in us
as long as breath is there;
her memories are like a mother's lap
where you find the ultimate solace.

How long will memories carry us;
how long help rebuild our lives?

Memories are the soul's ambrosia;
they are our lifetime savings
in the safe deposit of our minds,

true friends we can fall back upon
when we need them most –
when we're soaked in sadness,
or abandoned,
or in loneliness.

They are our connect with the past,
and there is no present sans past.
Even the saddest of memories
evoke sweet musings that last.

(28 October, 2007)

The Almanac

There was time, my son,
I would consult the Jantari
to inform me of the key events
and to guide me from day to day.

It navigated me fairly well
through the position of the planets
and the course of the moon
as she waxed and waned
in her unending cycles.

Now it is increasingly difficult
to tell days from nights,
to keep count of the weeks,
the fortnights and the months,
as the years melt away.

I hate to bother you
for I know quite well
that your hands are full,
but I would urge you
to fast on the ashtamis,
to light a lamp on the amavesyas,
and to stay vegetarian on the poornimas.

And, most important of all,
pray never forget the Chetra chatruthi,
your revered father's anniversary,
when you must perform the shraddha
and invite kith and kin
to pay homage to his memory.

Pray why would you be chained
to the almanac, dear mother?
Does it really matter which day is what –
ashtami, amavesya or the other –
when we know all too well
that one day is like another?
Why can't we unshackle ourselves
from this bondage to the almanac –
the customs and rituals it prescribes,
the benign indulgences it proscribes?

As to our food and faith,
either I am a vegetarian or I am not,
either I am a believer or I am not;
I cannot be one today
and the other tomorrow.

It does matter, my son,
or there would be no calendar,
no names of the days of the week,
or the months of the year.

It is change,
that lends meaning to life
and spice to our existence,
or life would be one long amavesya
without much substance.

(5 November, 2007)

Another Fall

Mother,
how did you manage
to fall down yet again?
Don't you remember,
the last time you tripped over?
Even as it was a hairline fracture,
it left you unsure on your feet,
it left me insecure about you.

Can I help it, my son,
plagued as I am
by the constant fear,
that if I don't rush to the toilet
I may soil my underwear?
There is not a worse shame
than that of incontinence,
be it of the bladder,
be it of speech.

Since we are generally around
why don't you call us for help?
With your bones so brittle
and your feet unsure,
even a trivial fall
could cause a major fracture.
God forbid,
if that happens,
it will be a disaster.

You know it better than me,
old age comes with a baggage –

loss of balance and incontinence,
and freefalls in the bargain.

Mother,
I could never beat you
in argument;
but you make it appear
like a laughing matter.

What is life worth, my son,
without a touch of humour?
In any case,
let me make it clear,
I have no heart to bother you
every time for every task
that I must do on my own.
I would rather sustain a fall
than call you at an unearthly hour.

But I don't remember a time
when you were not there for me
for every little difficulty –
sleeping or waking,
fair weather or foul.

Well, that is what it takes
to be a mother, my son.
But let me tell you this:
Mothering a mother
is not an easy matter.
You will grow weary of it
sooner than you have begun.

(20 November, 2007)

What use Charity and Prayer?

When they came asking for alms
you never sent the mendicants away.
You let the *sadhus* inside your home
any season, any time of the day.
You went for them all the way
even as I decried the 'holy' men,
high on bhang or opium,
and asked you not to trust them.

Don't you agree, my son,
there could yet have been
one godly man amongst them?
How could I shut my door to him,
even if, in the process,
I had to open it to others,
be they charlatans or impostors?
How could I send a suppliant away,
whatever his credentials be,
if he were naked and hungry?
Besides, an act of kindness
can help change mindsets;
it may mend a broken heart;
it may retrieve a lost soul.

What has been your gain
from a lifetime of charity
and days spent in prayer
if the reward has been to suffer
one setback after another?

I know you are teasing me
as is your wont, my son,

yet let me state it again:
charity is not for making gains,
nor prayer for seeking rewards.
As to pain and suffering,
have you heard of anyone
who hasn't suffered
sometime or other?

(25 November, 2007)

Humour in Suffering

Mother,
I am going up on the roof
for my evening constitutional;
pray let me know
if you need anything for now?

Could you give me a pill
to silence my bladder;
the toilet beckons me again and again
like the proverbial moneylender.

Here, take a pill now;
put it under your tongue
and let it dissolve there
to take quick effect.
But wait, you are up again;
where to now, dear mother?

I must hurry to repay the debt
I spoke to you just now about.

You always make me wonder:
even in desperate situations
that would cause others to whimper.
you never lose your sense of humour.

Pray don't hold me any longer;
soon as I return from the toilet
I will tell you a lot more
about the wily moneylender,
for I am only paying the interest,
the principal is still outstanding
if you care to look in his ledger.

(30 November, 2007)

Fish Out of Water

Mother,
it doesn't stand to reason
that you should thus suffer
in spite of the many virtues
that defined your whole life,
and the values you held dear.

You gave alms with both hands;
you clothed the naked fakirs.
You would not break your fast
before you fed the birds.
You worshipped the trees;
you propitiated the deities.

I vividly remember the day
we took a ferry upstream.
Just when we took our seats,
the boatman hauled the net
and delivered his catch of fish
into his boat's shallow well.

Fish out of water they were,
tossing about, leaping in the air.
You could not bear to watch them
gasping for each breath,
fighting for their life.

You at once asked the boatman:
Pray what price is your catch?
He said he would weigh the fish
before he could let you know.

Quickly producing your purse
and opening the strings wide
you pleaded with him:
Pray make a quick guess;
take your price, whatever,
and, before they all fall dead,
toss the fish back into the river.

The boatman flung the fish
back into the swirling water,
as he took the cash from you
and started roving up the river.

Surprised, I ventured to ask:
What did you gain, dear mother
paying for a basketful of fish
that have gone back into the river?

Could we have sat in the boat, my son,
watching the fish die one by one?

That seems a queer explanation
for fishing is his rightful vocation,
and he will surely catch them again,
sooner than we are ashore.

Yes, he will cast the net again,
but, for now, my dear son,
the ones that were destined to live
have swum out of his ken.
Sometimes, when we are in dire straits
God comes himself or sends someone.

This transpired a long time ago
when you were a lot younger
and I was a curious teenager,

trying hard to understand
life's puzzles and paradoxes.

Now it makes me wonder
why God should beset you
with one problem or the other?
Why doesn't he send a saviour
when you sometimes suffer
like fish out of water?

Let us be grateful to Him
for His little mercies, my son.
He takes our care every time
in more ways than one.
But when He really finds us
like fish out of water,
He devises ways and means
for our deliverance.

(9 December, 2007)

Uncomplaining

Mother,
your silence about your eyesight
baffles me no end.
Either you are so deeply hurt
that you neither complain
nor talk about it any more,
or you are fully reconciled
to live with the impairment,
or you have attained that inner vision
to have no need for external sight,
even as your beautiful brown eyes
sparkle and shine ever so bright.

For only that can explain
your tranquillity and poise
even as you can only see
hazy outlines, not visages,
mere shadows, not images;
even as you can no longer read
the epics and the scriptures
which you would not forgo
even for a day?

You stick to your strong faith
and never idle your time away.
You don't lose a moment
chanting *bhajans*, hymn and verse,
and I don't remember a time
a curse escaped your lips,
nor ever a hint of despair.

Remember, my son,
idleness is a curse,
despairing is even worse;
let not the mind wither away
even as the body goes to decay;
if the external senses part company
let the inner senses come into play.

(14 December, 2007)

A Midnight Bath

Mother,
what are you doing there,
sitting on the edge of your bed
in this terrible weather,
at this unearthly hour,
naked like a fakir?

The wind howls at the window
waiting to bite the frail and old
with its fangs sharp and cold;
everyone is curled up in bed
tucked under a warm blanket.

I am doing nothing odd,
only donning my nightwear
after I took a quick shower
to welcome the New Year.
It was all in vain
to wait the whole day
for the rain to stop
and the chill to abate.

But I don't remember
having turned on the geyser.
Pray, what was the urgency
for a cold shower
in the middle of a freezing night?
You know as much as I do,
the pneumonic bug is around,
stalking the infirm and old,
eager to gain a foothold.

Pray stop worrying, my son;
come, rub some cream on my back
where my hands can't reach
and forgive me this minor lapse
that did no harm to no one.

I might as well let you know,
in all my ninety-odd years
I hardly ever missed a shower
on the eve of a New Year.
I would rather contract the bug
than break a life-long ritual.

Mother,
you always had a penchant
to make light of a situation,
but I need to caution you
even at the risk of repetition
that a small slip is all it takes
to land one in dire straits?

Much as I agree with you,
let me remind you, my son,
I have lived by my conviction.
I don't mind the end,
how it comes and when.

(31 December, 2007)

Usher in the New Year

Mother, it is inspirational
to watch you begin the year
with the telling of beads,
and a soulful prayer.

There is no better way, my son,
than to chant Om Namah Shivaye
as you move one bead after another,
going up to hundred and eight
and repeating the cycle over again.

Tucked away in my bag
are a number of rosaries;
I would gladly gift you one
to usher in the New Year.

Beads are for retirees
to while leisure hours away.
As for me, dear mother,
it gives me jitters
how fast time flies,
how it slips through my fingers.

The wheel of time never stops,
it knows no rest, my son.
It neither slows nor runs fast,
and yet, it is the karmayogins
who find time for everything
in the midst of numerous tasks –
a walk in the woods,
a little prayer,

a dialogue with a mother,
and even a hand at the beads.

Moving the beads, my son,
and chanting a mantra with each one,
is neither kill-time nor mere fun;
nor is it just for the idle or the old,
but a sadhna for every one.
It is a means to an end,
a time to look within.

(1 January, 2008)

Driving the Demons Away

Mother,
how could I be so insensitive
to your nagging fears!
How could I have dismissed them
as figments of your imagination!
How could I turn a blind eye
to the eerie shapes and figures
you saw moving in front of you,
daring you,
scaring you!

Night after night after night,
they teased and taunted you.
They haunted you in the dark,
not letting you rest or sleep.
But I explained them away
as illusions and visual distortions
because of your nebulous sight.

I do believe in them, you said,
for it is me they come after.
And they are real, my son,
for they torture me so often.
They may sound imaginary to you,
but who is to decide
what is unreal and what is true?

Even if they were a fantasy,
it was thoughtless of me,
to reject the simple remedy
you pleaded for so fervently.
It would cost me no effort

to burn some incense or myrrh
that you asked me to do,
but I made a trifling excuse
that the smoke would hurt your eyes,
that such quaint practices
were anathema in a doctor's house.
I have got into this dreadful habit
to flaunt my scientific temper,
to reject your simple remedies
for everyday maladies,
to pooh-pooh them
as old wives' fantasies.

But now,
for four days in a row,
it has been a great relief
not to find you apprehensive
when I come to check on you.
Pray tell me, dear mother,
who scared the ghosts away?

None but this little paperknife,
that your brother gifted me
to open the letters you wrote me
when I was with him in the USA.

For the last four nights,
before I retired to my bed,
I slashed the air with the knife
to drive the spirits away,
and secured it under my pillow
and slept without a care.

That is what our ancestors did
when the djinns and goblins

teased and terrorized them.
That is what worked for them;
that is what has worked for me.

I agree with you, my son,
it may all be wild imagination
that bedevils an old person,
yet, let us not forget,
every trifling object has a function,
even a blade of grass in your lawn
and a small pebble by the ocean.

(14 January, 2008)

History in Suitcases

Mother,
oh, how it must tire you
to zip open your suitcases
and zip them close.

It is hard to watch you
going through the ordeal
of bending over the contents,
turning them over,
sorting out your garments,
searching the side-pockets,
fingering the purses and pouches
with your tremulous hands.

I marvel how you quiz yourself
and recall the history of each item –
the red *zarbaph* blouse
grandmother gifted you on your wedding;
the variegated *kanishawl*
father got you on your golden jubilee;
the rings, the bangles, the necklace,
the miniature Gita, the reading lens,
the letters father wrote you...
Well, the list is long,
and deep are the bowels
of your suitcases.

Come, let me sort them out for you
and give some order to your treasure.
Let us retain the things you need
and discard those you can do without.

Dear son,
every blouse, shawl and pullover;
every bangle, ring and trinket here,
has a history to tell.
These purses and pouches you see
are small packets of memory;
they conjure nostalgic images
of the people and places,
and of the times I lived in.
They are a part of my history
and will stay till I am me.
After I am gone,
well, who cares, my son?

(20 January, 2008)

Walking Frame

Mother,
every time you walk
I hold my breath
lest the cane slip from your grip
and you land on the floor.

Isn't it is time to switch over
to the more secure walker
that has been lying in the corner
this whole week since it arrived?
Pray look at this proud steed,
easy to handle and easy to steer,
waiting eagerly to take you around.

Go give the steed some grass,
for I have no need for it,
or for a camel or an elephant.
I would rather trust this cane,
your dear father's legacy
that has stood well by me.
When I carry it along,
I feel he is by my side
walking hand in hand with me.
And I feel him
watching me from that corner
where I put it aside
and retire to my bed.

(3 February, 2008)

Your Thoughtful Son

Until I concocted a tale,
you would not even care to look
at the sleek walking frame
that had been waiting for you,
for a long time, dear mother.
But your eyes lit up in gratitude
when I told you
that your youngest son,
had sent it from overseas.

You croaked in emotion:
Oh, why did he have to send it
all the way from the USA
when we have walking frames
available at the next store!

You gave it a try at once
and took fondly to it
like a duck to water.
And, ever since that day,
you like to amble across,
pushing it in front of you,
feeling that much secure.
You were a real baby
to have believed my fiction.

So it was a hoax you played on me;
it was you and not your brother
that got this walking frame!
All the same, my dear son,
pray don't burden your conscience,
for harmless lies sometimes
may help change minds
and cause happiness all around.

(17 February, 2008)

Temple in a Bag

Mother,
what is so precious in your bag,
that has been with you
ever since I remember?

Hardly much, my son,
except some odds and ends –
tooth picks and ear-buds,
hankies and safety pins,
needles, thread and buttons,
a nail cutter and a file,
and some coins and currency
that often come handy.
They cater to my everyday needs;
I put them in different pockets
to remember which is where.

Don't tell me that is all;
there has to be some more
the way you guard it like a treasure,
groping inside the pockets there.

Now that you want to know,
the inner pocket is a temple
where my little Siva resides
tucked up alongside a picture
of your venerated father.
I must have a glimpse of them
first thing on waking up;
I seek their audience again
when I retire for the night.

(30 March, 2008)

Looking for Tweezers

Mother,
I find you perilously perched
and almost doubled over.
Are you looking for something
that I might retrieve for you?
Please take care;
you might fall down the bed
and bump your head on the floor.

Pray don't bother, my son;
I am looking for a tiny object
that has gone into hiding,
in the drawer somewhere
or under the bed.

Look how out of place you are,
your delicate frame doubled up,
your water flask rolled over,
your bed sheets rumpled,
your dress crumpled.
It will please me to know
about this precious object
that sends you on a wild hunt.

Now that you ask,
it is my tweezers,
that tend to go missing
when I need them most.

Oh, I see,
but why may you be so keen
to pull a few filaments out

that you so tire yourself
looking for the tweezers
and risk falling from the bed?
I never saw you dyeing your hair;
why may you be so concerned
about a few facial strands,
dear mother?

It is one thing to grey gracefully
with the head turning silver;
it is another to look masculine
with a moustache and a beard
even as you may be a matriarch.

(10 April, 2008)

The Itch

You must have grown weary
looking after me, my son,
grappling with my ailments
that surface now and then.

The periodic movements of my legs
seems to have put you to test
as you juggle with different drugs
with just a modicum of success.

Even as you got me a new pair,
the hearing-aid slips from my ear
and gets caught in my tangled hair
till you retrieve it with gentle care.

You are thankfully spared
the waiting hours at the dentist's,
for my gums are receding fast
and my teeth falling away.
No extractions for me now,
no fillings, no root canals,
no caps, no implants.
Trees can't grow in the air
when the soil is not there.

And all the other demons
you have to wrestle with –
the pains and aches,
the irritable bladder,
the unstable posture…

But it is the obstinate itch
that makes me miserable

as I scratch the whole day
with little relief whatever
from allergy pills and creams,
that you prescribe one after another.

I hate to pester you
at odd hours of the day
to scratch the itch away
when it is right in the back
where my hands do not reach
while yours are so full.
It is then
the wooden backscratcher,
your father left behind,
comes as a big relief.
It is like his gentle hands
scratching me softly, lovingly.

I would love to call it a day
and retire to that final abode,
yet going there is neither a picnic
nor like going to one's parental home
where a daughter can just walk in
any season, anytime of the day.
One can't go there unless called,
for entry is by merit alone,
no favours, no seniority!

(25 May, 2008)

Yet Another Fall

When I heard a gentle thud
like a door closing somewhere
I rushed to your bathroom,
to find you slumped athwart,
the walking frame upside down
on your prostrate figure.

You lay helpless in a daze,
hardly struggling to disengage,
your hair all over the place;
your hearing-aid
squeaking helplessly on the floor;
your glasses fallen off your nose
sighing sadly in a corner;
your slippers thrown asunder;
your socks wet,
your frock upset.

Shocked to find you in that state,
I tried to extricate you from this mess
but you declined my help,
insisting to be on your own,
to gingerly lift yourself
and sit up and stand again.

'Did you hurt yourself,' I asked,
but you shooed me away
and got hold of the walker
and shuffled to your bed,
to reveal a little bump
on your back, near the rump.

You would not let me tend to it
though it must have hurt quite a bit,
even as you dismissed the fall
of not much consequence at all.

But it is the denial of a handicap,
the casual attitude to a near-catastrophe,
and the breaking of rules between us –
about your visits to the bathroom
without you shouting for my help –
that worries me no end.

Rules get broken once in awhile,
or they would not be rules.
I could not have gone on waiting
until you responded to my call;
I would prefer a benign fall
to the shame of incontinence.

You know it better than me,
old age makes us unsteady.
How long can you stop the falls
unless you want me glued to the bed?
In that case, my dear son,
death would be a better option.

(28 May, 2008)

Then There Was No Shame

When you couldn't do it
on your own any longer
you didn't mind me helping you
with your bath, dear mother.

All shame evaporated at once
as if it had never been there
like dew on the morning
of a hot summer.

There was no inhibition,
neither with you nor with me,
as I slowly undressed you
and poured jugfuls of water,
soaping your shrivelled skin
and your silken grey hair,
lathering your shrunken frame
and your wasted muscles
that have left hollows everywhere.

Your withered breasts
looked at me abashedly
like punctured balloons.
Your receding lower belly
managed to hide your shame
as you sat nude before me
on the bathing chair.

What notion of privacy
had you harboured before
that you wouldn't let me shower you
even as it was so perilous

to do it on your own,
dear mother?

What was there to hide from me
who had seen you full nine months
from inside your belly,
and from outside
ever since you gave me birth,
and for many years afterwards
as you held my numbed feet
between your warm thighs
when I got them cold and wet
playing in the snow,
and when you warmed my blue hands
on your soft breasts?

You knew my nakedness
when I took birth,
but I knew yours
even before I was born.

Time has taken a full circle;
we are being natural once again,
dear mother.

(14 June, 2008)

Dear to Him

Mother,
the devotees were glad to see me
after a long absence
when I went up the hill
to visit the Aap Shambu temple.

Some, cross-legged in meditation,
opened their eyes to greet me.
Several others pressed flowers
into my cupped hands,
and I laid them at the altars
as I filed past the deities
in their small enclosures.

As I was retreating backwards
in reverence to the Lord,
another familiar figure came near
to deliver roses into my hands.
Looking fervently at me, he said,
"Pray offer these to the Lord,
He might heed me through you.
Verily those who serve their mothers,
are dearer to Him than all others."

Think about it, dear mother,
do I deserve such indulgence
from the Lord's trusting devotees?
When I look at how you suffer
it makes me wonder
if He even listens to *my* prayers.

Yes, my son,
He does listen to those
who not only serve their mothers
but all others who need them.
God has placed you specially
to serve humanity.
All you need to do
is to treat your patients
as your own kin
and to raise the bar
whenever you feel
you have done enough.

(18 June, 2008)

Craving Company

I am my own company,
my own friend and confidante.
Pray how many are there
who have time to spare
to share a thought with me?

With my hearing handicap
why would anyone bother
to shout into my ear?

With my sight impaired
I wouldn't even recognize people
except by their voice.
But even voices have changed,
tinged as they are
with bitterness and bile.

With my unstable gait
I avoid moving out
lest I stumble
or tread on someone's feet.

I would love to share
the here and now of everyday life,
but I am not sure
if I am
anywhere in the reckoning?

I sit back in my room,
imagining who is doing what –
the maid washing the dishes,
the gardener tending the lawn,
the neighbour chatting across the fence,

the hawker selling vegetables,
the postman with the mail,
the kid next door to retrieve his ball,
a guest dropping by...

I keep count of phone calls
from my siblings and children
settled across continents,
for I want to hear their voices,
to know everything about them –
who is due for a degree,
who is going to be married,
who is expecting a baby...

I worry about each one of them
even as I am gently reminded
that I have done my share
of the worrying over the years.
But I cannot help being concerned,
for they are my flesh and blood
and I love life in its wholeness.

I am being looked after
as well as can be,
my needs well taken care of –
my hearing aid tagged to my ears,
my medicines delivered timely,
my bath ready when it is due,
my clothes washed, dried and pressed,
and my favourite dishes served to me –
yet I crave for what is not,
and pine for what could be,
for I like life to be meaningful,
and to live every bit of it.

(25 June, 2008)

Seamless

Mother,
for several days now
I have been watching you
wear your dresses inside out.
Are you are making a mistake,
or is it deliberate?

I do it on purpose, my son,
for the seams sting my skin.
They give me an itchy rash
in this hot and humid season.
I have been feeling a lot better
since I wore my frocks outside in.

But the seams look unseemly
and out of place with your grace.
They seem to stare at us
as if speaking out in protest.
Should I ask the seamstress
to stitch you a seamless shirt?

Whoever heard of a seamless shirt
or a seamless life, my son?
Life is a dress we go on stitching,
to hold it together
with new seams every day.
The only seamless dress is a shroud,
and a seamless state is death
when life gets unstitched
in a single gasp.

(28 June, 2008)

Tastes and Cravings

Mother,
your odd cravings
and changing tastes
surprise me no end.

From one spoon of sugar in tea
you have gone up to three;
warm milk that you loved to drink
now smells like castor oil;
the sweetest honey tastes tepid,
the sauciest food bland and insipid.

At dinner you miss
one thing or the other –
broccoli, beans or okra
potatoes, peas or pepper.
You seek fresh mint and coriander
from your own garden
even as other flavours
hover like thick fog
on the dinning table.

You crave dried vegetables
that we would store for winter
back home in Kashmir
even as fresh greens
are available here
all round the year.

You like your bread toasted dark brown
with a rich sprinkling of salt and pepper

unmindful that you could be nursing
a sore gum or an aphthous ulcer.

Why do you worry, my son,
when you should know
better than anyone
that ageing blunts the senses
and whets the cravings.
You will have to agree
I am growing old
rather tastefully!

For all I know,
my cravings could be
the last burst of a flame
before it goes out?

(30 June, 2008)

Calling it Quits

When you dropped the plate
it seemed a trivial accident;
when you threw the towel
into the trash can,
it took us by surprise;
but when you spat in the hankie
although the spittoon was right there
it became a matter of concern.

So much have we been used
to your elegance and style,
your decorum and discretion,
that even minor transgressions
seem like gross aberrations.

I don't understand why
you are so fazed, my son,
when it was you that said
that every system in the body
decays one percent yearly
after we reach age forty.

By that count
I am on borrowed time
and nearly on the brink.
My systems are in retreat,
and time has arrived
to call it quits.

Ninety is as old as can be,
much older than many imagine,

when mistakes are commonplace
and mishaps bound to happen.

Everything that goes up
has to come down;
life that has been lived,
has one day to end.

(2 July, 2008)

On Your Teeth

Mother,
it is a shame,
we couldn't quite catch up
with the dentist,
nor could the dentist catch up
with your teeth.

All those waiting hours,
the root canals and fillings,
the caps and bridges,
the implants and extractions,
never seemed enough.

There is just one life we get
but even your nine decades
have not been long enough
to take care of all your teeth.

Now I gratefully realize
how lucky I have been
not to cut my wisdom teeth.
Wisdom may have eluded me,
but it is much less demanding
to handle twenty-eight
than thirty-two!

Don't you feel, my son,
that, for all the work they do,
our teeth don't get their due
while they grind away
whole day for us –

breakfast, lunch and dinner,
nuts, snacks and supper.
And yet, how callous we are
that, for all their service,
we have little time for them
when there is so much to spare
for so many vain things in life.

When doctors were scarce
and our teeth ached or tingled,
we suffered no qualms
to have them pulled out,
citing the old Persian refrain:
'It is always a good bargain
to get rid of a tooth in pain.'
But I fervently hope
no one employs that aphorism
to something as precious as life
that should be nurtured
to the very end.

(10 July, 2008)

They Call for a Trimming

Three times you reminded me
that your nails need a trimming;
three times I dodged you
on one pretext or another:
I have phone calls to answer,
I am reading the newspaper,
there is a rush of patients
in the waiting chamber.

Three times I promised;
three times I all but forgot,
for, to me, your growing nails
were not of much consequence,
even as, for you,
they were such a nuisance.

When your patience broke
you came seeking me,
pushing the walker along the floor
to reach my bedroom door.
I could sense you waiting there
not sure whether to knock
or to enter.

I opened the door,
to find you looking uneasy,
leaning wearily on the walker,
guilty for having startled me.

I am sorry, my son,
for what seems like an obsession,

but my nails are such a bother
growing on me by the hour.
You trimmed them just the other day,
yet how soon they have grown again,
and outgrown my patience.

What an irony, my son,
that these silly little appendages
keep growing unabashedly
while my body wastes away.

And for sure, dear mother,
growing on my conscience
as they point at my nonchalance,
for I clearly see and hear
how loudly they clamour –
for a trimming,
and a filing,
and a cleaning,
and a polishing.

(15 July, 2008)

Do I Deserve To Be Your Son?

When I recall
how many nights you spent awake
looking after me
in my infancy;

when I recall
how often I wet your bed
even as you secured me in diapers
that you yourself stitched for me;

when I remember
how often you went hungry
tending me in my illness –
colds, measles, chicken pox
and bouts of abdominal pain
that the doctors could not explain;

when I think of my school days
and see you sitting by my side
as I studied into the night,
to give me company,
knitting me a jersey;

when I think of the days
I would stroll in the lawn
with a book in my hand,
as you walked by my side,
morsels of food in your hand
to feed your absent-minded son
as he memorized his lesson;

when I remember
how you shut your eyes

to my many transgressions
and threw a blanket of security
around me
to spare me a reprimand;

when I recount
the sacrifices you made
and the tasks you undertook,
for me to go up life's ladder
without hitch or hinder;

when I remember
the fervent prayers you offered,
the lucky charms you procured,
and the penances you made
that I may stay out of harm;

when...

It is then
that I curse my impatience
and my bursts of temper,
while minding you, dear mother;

it is then
that I find myself drowning
in a sea of shame,
of wretchedness,
of guilt;

it is then I feel
unworthy of being a son
of a mother
like you.

(16 July, 2008)

The Nagging Fly

I am sorry, dear mother,
even as I endeavour to secure you
from the insects and pests,
they yet manage their way inside.

Even as I vacuum your room
to suck the dust and cobwebs away,
the salivating spiders keep returning,
climbing down their silken threads
to dangle and swing in front of you.

I have no antidote
for the geckos,
gawking at love-sick moths
that have clung to your lantern,
or squirreling along the walls,
or tumbling down on your bed.

I have no remedy
for sundry insects and glow worms
that trespass through the wire-mesh windows
to beguile you in your pensive moments.

I know, my son,
how hard you strive
to keep me out of harm's way,
but it is the solitary fly
finding its way into my room
that bothers me most
with its sheer impertinence.

It drives me out of my wits
as it bounces on my body –

sitting now on my hand,
now on my foot,
now on the cheeks,
now on my big nose.

I hate this blind-man's buff
that the fly plays with me
while I do not mind the games
that other creatures play.
I curse it
for its audacity and arrogance,
for its dogged pestilence.

Could you please order a maxi
long enough to reach my toes
and with sleeves that stretch
beyond my fingers?
Could you look inside my suitcase
and fish out my balaclava cap
that I would like to wear
even in this blazing summer,
to shield me from the nagging fly?

(28 July, 2008)

To Be A Falling Star

There was time, my son,
I would track the calendar
by watching the moon –
how it waxed and waned
through the months of the year.
Now I seem to have forgotten
how she looks like
when she rises
from behind the hill
or plays hide and seek
in a cloud.

The stars are as far away
as the imagination goes;
now I seem to have forgotten
how they arrange themselves
across a faultless sky
in clusters, constellations
and the milky way.

How I wish
I could see a star
and catch it as I would
in my childhood,
to tie it in my handkerchief
and hold it captive.
I would not let it go
until my wish was granted.

Yes, I have a wish
to be a falling star.

My grandfather would say:
When a star falls,
somewhere in some land,
an old person passes away.

(31 July, 2008)

Pillbox

I consume pills like a ritual –
now to fight my water brash,
now to silence my bladder,
now to still my restless legs,
now to fight the sleep disorder.

You augment my diet with nutrients –
calcium to revitalize my bones,
vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants
to energize and to deoxidize;
aspirin to keep my blood thin,
statins to unclog my vessels,
and pills for my hypertension.

There are other drugs as well
that you prescribe now and then
for one or the other complaint –
aches and pains,
an unexplained fever,
an indigestion,
an inflamed liver…

I have lost count of the pills.
I smell pills.
I breathe pills.
I live pills.
I have become a pillbox!

No, my son,
I don't desire a longer run
than the body can take.

Much that one would want to go on
as long as it takes,
one should depart
much before
the winding down has begun.

(2 August, 2008)

Leveller

Of late, my son,
it has been bothering me
that you look depressed
and rather absent-minded.

It hurts me deep
to find those lines on your brow,
and I shudder with fear
that you may be growing old
much faster than your mother.

Your are right, dear mother;
the enigma of ageing and illness
has been occupying my mind
ever since your health declined.
It is hard for me to accept
that a life of rectitude,
of diligence and fortitude,
and scintillating intellect,
can fall into decay.

Remember, my son,
sickness and old age
do not make any distinction.
The wicked fall
side by side with the virtuous,
the king with the slave,
the saint with the sinner.

(5 August, 2008)

Old Age

Even as you are a doctor
you need your old mother
to answer some of the riddles
that seem to occupy your mind
about sickness and old age.

While sickness can seize anyone
old age is no disease, my son,
but a remorseless regression,
from where there is no return.

Old age is like a ship
worn out riding the waves,
tired and longing to run aground
or rest at the bottom of the sea.

Old age is a downward tumble
after a life of uphill climb;
the final lap of a journey
that ends at the cemetery.

You know it better than me:
decay is encoded in the seed
that has yet to sprout into life;
everything that is born
has to wither away and die;
life is a chance in a million
but death is a certainty.

(7 August, 2008)

Section Two—Soliloquies



Hip Fracture

I trooped down the two flights of stairs after my customary 30-min roof-walk and opened the door to mother's bedroom to check on her. From her bathroom I heard feeble cries for help. I rushed in to find her crumpled on the floor near the washbasin, her back against the bath chair, her arms athwart, her legs in a bizarre scissor position.

Her left leg dangled awkwardly when I lifted her onto the bath chair. My heart sank for I sensed a hip fracture. By that time Leela appeared from the kitchen to check on her, unaware of the mishap. Together we wheeled mother back to her bed. Utterly exhausted, she collapsed like a rag doll. Before we could even ascertain the nature and intensity of the trauma, we decided to relieve her of the bladder distress.

The catheterization done, the urosac hooked in and hung from her bed, we supported mother by cushions and bolsters and sat by her side to take stock of the situation. She was perspiring and lay quiet and motionless, no longer complaining about her bladder. I decided not to subject her to a detailed examination, but to wait and watch until the morning.

It was a night of nightmares, of horrible visions and fears. Mother dozed off from sheer exhaustion without her usual sleeping pill. She did not even once complain of pain and made no movement whatsoever.

In the morning light she looked pale and sickly and seemed to have grown older by a decade. She grimaced when I turned her supine. A large irregular blue-black bruise had spread to her lower abdomen, groin and thighs—the blood from the broken hip finding its way from deep within to the surface, like an oil spill from a ship.

We tried to feed her, but she just managed to swallow a few spoonfuls with difficulty. Suddenly she raised her hands

towards the sky and started humming mantras as if nothing had happened, as if life was meant for prayer and for thanksgiving for every moment granted to us, for life spared at any cost!

Then she fell silent and remained speechless for several days. However, the catastrophe had just begun; we were in for a long vigil. The orthopaedic surgeon advised against any surgical intervention for more reasons than one, most importantly the history of imbalance and frequent falls against which there was no guarantee even if she survived hip replacement surgery.

In the first week her level of awareness dropped; she vacillated between wakefulness and vacancy; speech was scarce; and she slipped into spells of delirium with myriad psychiatric manifestations. Whatever little she spoke was in monosyllables or short phrases and, sometimes, in parables and metaphors.

Gratefully, the spells of delirium petered out, and we went from one day to the next in relative calm, though she continued to remain bedridden and never walked again, as we helplessly watched the inexorable physical and mental decline of this beautiful, gracious human being.

(9 August, 2008)

A Nightlong Vigil

It was the least I could do,
to watch over you
when you were in pain
from the broken hip,
and in shock
from loss of blood.

I lapsed into melancholic moods
and agonized for the whole night,
while you,
guilty of having sustained a fall,
did not even complain!

You sensed my discomfiture
even in that shocked state;
you suffered in silence
to spare me any inconvenience.

I spent just one night
watching over you,
and already feel the strain
that makes me whine
like a petulant kid.
But you did it happily for me
when I was small,
and for all my adult life
when it was not your call.

You sacrificed night after night
when I was a babe in arms,
and later, as a strapping youth
when I would study into the night

while you kept me company,
sitting by my side,
knitting a pair of socks for me.

You did it faithfully
and never complained;
you forwent sleep happily
for you were only too glad
to be always there for me.

Uncomplaining, untiring,
you sacrificed countless nights,
while I can count the hours
I remained awake for you.

(10 August, 2008)

A New Beginning

The worst fears
that dogged us a whole year
have proved true, alas.
What I guarded against,
like the proverbial serpent,
has finally come to pass.
You have been grounded
with a hip fracture,
helpless and bedfast.

The calamity-in-waiting has struck;
and old age, ever fragile and frail,
vindicates itself yet again,
blazing suffering in its trail.

Yet, paradoxical as it may sound,
there is some sense of relief
that the worst has happened,
and we have to agonize no more
that you will slump to the floor,
no more to die with the fear
that you will stage an encore.

Strangely, sometimes,
a tragedy is easier to bear
than the agony, suspense and fear
before it finally strikes.
Pain becomes the panacea
when there is no succour in sight.
Life teaches us to cope
with hardships and calamities

that seem impossible to fight
until they strike.

There are decisions to take;
there's work to do;
no point in beating our chests,
no time for repentance and regrets.

(11 August, 2008)

The Bathroom is Desolate

Mother,
your bathroom wears a desolate look;
the walls resound with an eerie silence;
the echo of your rhythmic footfalls
is but a distant memory;
the toilet seat gapes in wonder;
the tissue rests idly in the holder;
the bottle of oil, the soap case,
the shampoo and the toothpaste,
look inquiringly at each other;
the taps are dry, the shower silent,
the bath towel all too redundant;
the mirror no longer reflects your image,
but only a collage of memories.

Yet they all wait in silence,
hoping that you will walk in
and enliven them once again
with your gracious presence.

(14 August, 2008)

You Have Not Spoken

Mother,
it is a full week
you have not spoken a word.
My ears ache to hear you,
as I try coming to grips
with the calamity
that has struck.

I wring my hands helplessly
craving to hear you speak again,
to exchange a dialogue with me,
as you look on inquiringly
with your beautiful brown eyes.

When will your dulcet voice
soothe my soul again?
How long do I have to wait,
how long to die
to receive a blessing from you?

Pray speak to me again.
Come, if not a blessing
let it be a reprimand.
Let it even be a curse,
for, verily, a mother's curse
masquerades for a boon.
Pray don't inundate me
in your silence
that is so hard to endure,
dear mother.

(15 August, 2008)

Squeamish Son

When you moved your bowels
first time in eight days
after you sustained the fracture,
I was shocked by the odour.

What a wonderful exterior
Nature has endowed us with
to hide what lies within;
yet how readily are we betrayed
when taken off guard
by illness or bad temper!

It was not your fault at all,
for I was under a melancholy spell
after your catastrophic fall;
I had quite forgotten
your bowels needed attention
as did your bladder.

I never felt as squeamish
in dealing with my patients
who soil their beds and bodies,
and, sometimes,
our hands and dress as well.
But it was a rude shock,
coming from someone dear,
so sublime and pure;
from one who bore me in her womb,
and insulated me all my life
from odious smells and odours
with her divine fragrance.

Then I remembered an incident
when I was a teenage student:
While sharpening my pencil one day,
the razor blade suddenly snapped
and nicked the tip of my finger.
In a bid to stanch the bleeding
I stuck the finger into my mouth,
but I was so terribly nervous
that I believed I had swallowed
a piece of the blade in the process.

Alarmed to hear my story,
you rushed me to the nearest doctor
who asked you to feed me pudding
and to screen my stools every day,
till I passed the chip of the razor.

Dutifully, you went through the task,
serving me the pudding every day,
asking me to defecate into a pan,
straining the stools through a muslin mesh,
scouring for the piece of razor.

The medical practitioner was a dud
to have believed my myth,
(he didn't even look into my mouth!)
and to conjure up that bizarre recipe,
but even a person as bright as you
was taken in by a boy's fiction
because you would leave nothing to chance
when it concerned your darling son.

That odious task was, for you,
a labour of love, dear mother.
You did not squirm like me,
you did not shut your eyes,

you did not hold your breath,
you showed no sign of sickness,
you did not take offence.
You went about your task
asking no questions.

(16 August, 2008)

Waiting for a Bath

When I came to check on you
in the middle of the night,
I was stupefied
to find you naked,
your arms across your chest,
your hair all over the face
like that of a yogini,
and it puzzled me
how you had undressed
on your own.

You did not speak,
you made no sign.
There you were,
a framework of humanity,
looking at me pleadingly.

I tried to help you to your clothes
but you resisted with all the might
that you could muster
in your frail, fleshless limbs.

It was then I realized that
you were waiting for a bath
for I had forgotten about it
for an entire week
after the mishap.

Awash with guilt,
I gave you a quick towel bath
and helped you to a clean dress
as your face lit up in gratitude,
and you quickly went to sleep.

(17 August, 2008)

Your Indulgence

When Sumitra reported for duty
and I introduced her to you,
it did not immediately sink in
that she was going to be
your night-time nurse.

When she held your hand
you opened your eyes to her,
a faint shadow of awareness
crossed your visage,
and you broke your silence
first time in ten days
as your innate kindness kindled
and you asked:
Has she had her dinner,
have you arranged a bed for her?

Although feeble and faint,
your words were music to my ears,
but weary from the effort
you lapsed into silence again
and left me craving for more.

(19 August, 2008)

Wilful Neglect

Mother,
it will haunt me all my life
whether I took the right decision
in dealing with your hip fracture;
whether it was wise to leave it alone
for you to nurse it on your own.

The orthopaedist warned me,
there was little guarantee
a hip replacement surgery
would put you back on your feet
without the risk of recurring falls.

Was I too eager to accept
his advice of 'wilful neglect',
and let your fracture be,
rather than hazard a surgery?

I might have given the same advice
to my patients in a similar situation,
yet, in the case of my own mother,
I am unable to convince myself
of the medical truism
that, in some adverse situations,
inaction is better than action,
wilful neglect better than indulgence.

(22 August, 2008)

Changing Paradigm

As we battle with new challenges
that your fall has thrown at us,
it amazes me, dear mother,
how the many tasks and rituals
that you couldn't do without
have suddenly become irrelevant,
while those never in the reckoning
have assumed centre stage.

You did not even once ask
for the icons, idols, and images,
that you prayed and propitiated
every day without fail.
The daily prayer and puja
you were so passionate about,
has suddenly come to an end.

You, who depended on no one,
but loved doing tasks your way;
you, whose strong self-faith
underpinned your whole life;
you, who hardly sought help
but readily reached out to others...
you have now to patiently wait,
and meekly submit,
to the moods and methods
of caregivers.

(24 August, 2008)

Shrinking Space

Mother,
over the last few years
it was painful to watch
your large footprint in different continents
(where your progeny have struck roots)
shrinking fast
and reduced to a small space
within the confines of this house.

But after your hip fractured,
all that is left of your enormous
presence
is your tiny figure on the bed
where you lie curled up,
like a foetus,
back to the primordial state.

It breaks my heart to see
how a massive chinar
that sheltered everyone
has fallen down;
how a giant star
that brightened many lives
has suddenly collapsed.

(29 August, 2008)

I Cut Your Hair

I did what I would not normally dare
even in my wildest dreams;
I cut your hair, dear mother,
that I will regret all my life.

I cut your long luxuriant hair,
silken and silver-black,
that you had nurtured
through ninety winters.

I trimmed the hair
that had adorned your head
ever since you were born,
the hair everyone envied
for being long and lustrous
even at your age.

I cut the hair
that you groomed with passion
for my father to tousle
in his tender moments.
I cut the hair
that had never seen
a pair of scissors.

I don't know what frenzy
seized me suddenly.
It took me less than ninety seconds
to erase the legacy of ninety years!

What a terrible sacrilege
to cut your hair short

without your permission,
without your knowledge.

My logic must sound silly
that I trimmed your hair
to make care-giving easy
because your hair got in the way
as you lay in bed all the time,
helpless and delirious,
tangling your hair in distress,
throwing it into knots
difficult to unravel and groom.

Carried away by my zeal
I took the snap decision,
and plied the scissors
like a skilful surgeon.

When you realized my perfidy,
oh, how it shocked you
even in your twilight state,
as you let out an anguished groan:
Father Tathya will chastise me,
as if he were still alive,
as if you were still his babe!

Oh, why didn't I cut my hand
before I cut your beautiful hair!
Oh, why was I not stunned
before I even thought of it!
Oh, how unthinking we can be
in our misplaced zeal,
even when it is in good faith,
even when it is to serve!

(1 September, 2008)

When Will You Speak?

Mother,
when will you speak;
when will I hear
your sweet voice again?
Every time I come near
and look into your eyes
they seem to see beyond me.

You look peaceful and calm;
but I can fathom a turbulence.
What is passing through your mind?
What mysteries are you pondering on?
What puzzles are you solving?
What knots unravelling?

How do I catch your attention?
Is there a flicker of recognition?
Mother, please say something;
my heart throbs in anticipation

I am trapped in a maze
unable to find my way.
I would like to stand up
but my legs won't carry.
I want to watch the stars,
but a dense fog blocks me?
I would open this magic box
but can't find the key.
I would like to speak
but words have deserted me.

(15 September, 2008)

Retreat

Mother,
It breaks my heart
to watch you in retreat,
your physical needs shrinking,
your thoughts centred on
who knows what.

You neither complain,
nor demand anything,
nor show any intent;
as if content
with the state you are in.

You would remember the distant past
as sharply as morning breakfast;
you recited the vaakhs of Lalla
and the verses from Ramayana;
you quoted the scriptures
as freely as a school kid
rattles out the tables;
you had birthdays and anniversaries
on the tips of your fingers.

Oh, how tragically it changed,
so much, so fast
to leave me aghast
as you get wreathed in wrinkles,
imprisoned in your bony cage.

And yet, at times,
you give the impression
of having turned inwards,

like the meditating yogi,
shutting out the external world,
losing all count of time,
divorcing yourself
from time and space.

But I would rather have you
as the mother I always knew –
the humour, the grace, the indulgence
that I have been used to –
than going into a retreat
even if it be
into some super-conscious state.

(20 September, 2008)

Delirium

(1)

Mother,
there has been
a strange turn of events.
Unknown to you
and baffling for me,
you have turned delirious,
you're speaking in riddles.

The floodgates of memories
that were locked away
have been breached.
The skeletons are tumbling out.
The baring of your body
is fully matched
by the nudity of your mind.

It is all on display –
there is no shame,
no fear.
Your mind is free.

(23 September, 2008)

(2)

The sporadic spells
have exposed the chinks
in your 9-decade-old armour,
and bared the layers of the years
as you turn over the pages
of your history backwards.

All reserve has vanished for now;
the taboos you nurtured all your life
have been flung away
like soiled rags!

Till the other day
you would feel shy
and hide the tweezers
if I startled you unawares
plucking your facial hairs,
but now, you feel no qualms
when I volunteer to do it for you.

Strangely,
ageing and illness
sometimes force us
to override entrenched reserve,
setting us free in the process.
Serendipitously,
they help us lift
the mantle of hypocrisy
that we have worn all our life.

(27 September, 2008)

Design in Suffering

When Omkar, our family friend,
saw you in the state you are in,
he was wistful for a while,
before he ventured to say:
"Your mother has always been
gentle, kind and compassionate.
God has chosen her specially,
for only the noblest suffer thus.
Yet, look how blessed she is,
for he has also arranged
to post you at her service –
her own son, a doctor,
one of the best in town."

Frankly, dear mother,
I don't know what to make of it;
whether it was a poor consolation
or a vain compliment.
'Why should God inflict pain
on his chosen subjects?' I asked him.

"Because, there is so much of it
and he chooses the people
who can take it," he replied.

'But why choose my mother,
the noblest, as you call her,
for this punishment?'
I asked in exasperation.

"Because, it is penance,
not punishment, as you think.
Through her suffering

she atones for the sins of others.
There is a meaning to it
beyond what appears on the face,"
he spoke like a mystic.

'But I cannot see anything
beyond the pain and agony,'
I remonstrated gently.

"On the contrary,
I see here an opportunity
that doesn't come easy,"
he said almost with envy,
"for here you are
a son and doctor in one,
playing your part,
refining your art,
learning the lessons of life.
Verily it will come useful
in the service of the patients
you treat day in and day out.
Don't you think
there is a grand design in it?"

'But I don't find any sense in it;
I see nothing beyond the pain,
for I believe each one of us
needs to carry our own cross,'
I replied.

"Pain sublimates;
service purifies and elevates.
Remember Ramakrishna,
how he suffered
to take the pain of humanity?
Remember Lord Siva,

how he drank the poison
to save the gods?"

Dear mother,
I don't know, nor care,
about the Great Design,
but I know this for certain,
I would not like you to take
even an iota of the pain –
neither for me, nor for humanity –
even if the earth, sky and heaven.
were promised to me.

(14 October, 2008)

Memories Swept Away

Mother,
there is hardly anything left,
of your once rich repertoire
of stories and anecdotes.

You can hardly retrieve anything.
If you do, it is a jumble
from which I can't make much,
except, at best,
a sign,
an allusion,
a remote connection.

Isn't it strange about memories
that the oldest survive the longest?
You relate well to Fatehkadal
where you were born and brought up;
but Rajverikadal,
where you spent the prime of life
as a mother and wife,
doesn't make any impression.

You recall your earliest relations –
your father who loved you dearly,
your mother who passed away
when you were still an early teen,
your sister who was consumed by TB
soon after she was wed...
but you do not remember others
that came later in your life,
not even my father

whom you loved and revered,
who never left your thoughts
even for a single day
after he passed away.

Alas, what intellect gone to decay,
what great archives locked away,
what a profound life
coming to a dismal end.

Alas, the opportunities I missed
of sitting at your lotus feet
and learning life's higher truths
when you were at your best.

(28 October, 2008)

Transformation

Mother,
do you remember,
how a little spill of tea or water
would throw me out of gear,
a sneeze by someone offend me,
a dribbling nose make me queasy,
a grumpy grunt unnerve me,
a fart revolt me beyond measure?

But my deeper engagement with you
has taught me differently,
and transformed me
in no small measure
over the past year.

I am no longer squeamish
when half-chewed grains of food
tumble out of your tooth-scarce mouth;
I am not perturbed
when liquids drool out from the corners
and soil your frocks and sweaters;
I do not squirm when you belch,
nor shut my nostrils
when you strain in the toilet;
nor am I seized by sickness
when your underwear gets soiled
and I readily clean up the mess.

Clearing you nostrils of secretions,
your umbilicus of concretions,
your ears of wax,

your toenails of fungus,
are jobs I do with a flair;
and changing your bed sheets
every evening before I retire
is a task I perform in high gear.

From being a fussy caregiver,
minding you, dear mother,
has led me, serendipitously,
into a voyage of self-discovery.

(9 November, 2008)

Advancing a Ritual

Mother,
there has been a surge of visitors,
since you sustained the fracture.
My siblings flew from far and near
to help in your care,
to have your darshan,
to touch your feet,
to seek your blessings.

They sat by your side,
they strove to make rapport,
but it broke their hearts
to find you mute and remote.

Weeping silent tears,
they took several pictures,
to carry back with them
those haunting images
as mementos
of their whirlwind visit.

And they also fulfilled
a supreme religious duty
when they helped you drink
from their own hands
commercial holy water
sold in plastic packages
as Ganga jal!

Was it to respect their sentiments
that you readily gulped it down,
helping them to return home

with a modicum of solace,
because you well understand
that even as the entire world
has shrunk into a global village,
the many existential concerns
that beset humanity
sometimes make it obligatory
to advance a ritual,
by an unknown time factor?

Don't we hear of people
performing their own *shradda*
while still alive
and not leave it to their heirs?

(20 November, 2008)

On Your Birthday

When I quietly consider
that you are a year
into the tenth decade,
I can't make up my mind
whether to let the day pass
or to celebrate,
laid up as you are
almost in a locked-in state.

You look askance as I come near
to tie the *neirband* on your wrist.
You knit your brow in confusion
as I anoint it with vermilion.
And it hardly matters to you
whether I feed you the traditional *teher*
or a loaf of bread with herbal brew.
The new dress doesn't matter,
the birthday puja doesn't register;
and you choose to withdraw within
while greetings come pouring in.

Yes, I need to deliberate
on matters more existential,
not the least your quiescent state
that renders any celebration
out of tune,
inconsequential.

Yes, I need to think over
questions more fundamental
that grandfather always posed:
"Why make so much of birthdays,
when we should be shedding a tear
for the demise of another year?"

(4 December, 2008)

I Hear My Own Silence

I feel inundated
by an all-pervading silence.
I smell the rain
but neither see it fall
nor hear it patter.

I feel the breeze on my face
but neither hear the leaves rustle
nor see the trees sway.

The shadow of a sparrow
flits across my window
but I don't see the wings flutter
nor hear its soulful twitter.

I can't catch the everyday sounds
when you speak with each other;
I can fathom a vague murmur
but no words do I hear,
no meanings decipher.

Then I speak with myself,
too low for anyone to hear,
too low even for my own ear.

May be, I do not speak at all,
but the words just form within me.
May be, there are no words at all,
but only smudges and shadows.
May be, I only imagine
the sound of the words inside me,
for all I hear is my own silence.

(5 December, 2008)

Your Face – 1

Sitting by your bed
I helplessly watch
the right angle of your mouth
twitch involuntarily
with every blink of your eyes.

It was a tragic outcome
of ear surgery gone awry
several decades ago
when you were quite young.

The mishap left you stunned
with your right face paralyzed.
When you smiled it was a half smile;
when you laughed it was a half laugh.
It was a half-expression
of dejection and despair.

Untiringly, over the years,
you fought the catastrophe
until the severed nerve re-grew,
and you slowly recovered,
albeit with a weakened face –
an asymmetry,
a skewed smile,
a stiffness and ache.

As the nerve grew again,
some fibres went astray –
the ones for the eyelids
going to the mouth
and vice versa,

crossing each other
helter-skelter.

Ever since, the crisscross
played a tragedy of errors
on the theatre of your face –
the right mouth twitching
with each blink of your eyes,
the right eye winking
when you eat or speak.

Yet, all these long years,
you put up a brave face.
You endured the discomfort
and lived with the aberrations,
deftly managing to dodge them
with a sleight of your hand
that hardly anyone would notice.

But now,
you have been cruelly betrayed
by the state you find yourself in,
as you lie in your bed,
unable to defend your face,
no longer seeming to care
what others think of it.

(6 January, 2009)

Your Face – 2

But let me assure you, dear mother,
you still retain a beautiful face.
Your high and imposing nose
stands proudly on your face;
your beautiful brown eyes
still shining bright and deep;
your fine and lustrous hair
a dainty blend of grey and silver;
your handsome features
chiselled with long years.

Remember,
you were always a face in demand,
what with the beeline at your door
of family members and neighbours
wanting to have a glimpse of your face
first thing in the morning?

Remember,
they did not stop the ritual
even after that surgical mishap,
for they saw something beyond your face
that stirred their faith
and reinforced their notion
that looking at a righteous person
first thing in the morning
would augur well for them?

Verily, dear mother,
that divine face

now belongs to me,
entirely;
I feel blessed
as I sit beside your bed
watching your face.

(17 January, 2009)

Going to the Dentist

Mother,
I have been going to the dentist
to repair the crown of my incisor
that broke last week during dinner
for no reason whatsoever.

It had left an awkward gap,
and given me an oldish look,
a funny lisp to my speech,
a hole in my smile.
It caused me embarrassment
when crumbs slipped through
and flew down on the table
while I ate my food.

Every time I thought about it
my tongue played into the gap
making me self-conscious
like one afflicted with a tic.

Now, fitted with a new crown,
I am assailed by deep remorse
that I postponed visiting the dentist
when you wanted your teeth fixed.

"But see, how dreadful they look,"
you would gently remind me,
and each time I found an alibi:
'This is no age to lose sleep
about one's looks, dear mother;
small erosions are no big deal,

receding gums are beyond repair,
a few frayed edges don't matter.'

That was more than a year ago,
much before your hip fracture,
but now, it is seems too late
to make amends or suffer unease
for having dismissed your pleas.

It has dawned rather late on me
that everyone wants to look good,
even more so the elderly,
to boost their failing self-image
that gets inexorably battered
by the wear and tear of age.

Besides, I don't see anyone
who would happily want to wear
a toothy grin from carious teeth
or the toothless smile of old age.

(18 April, 2009)

Another Chore

Just as I wash the idols and icons
and offer them flowers and incense,
just as I change water in the pots
and scatter grain to the birds,
just as I water the flower beds
and weed them every so often,
so do I feed you, dear mother,
breakfast, lunch and dinner;
wash and bathe you without fail;
change your dress and turn your sides,
as you meekly submit to my care
from one day to another.

Yet, oftentimes,
when I take time off my chores
to sit by your side
and watch you a while,
I have not looked at a sadder face,
nor that deep vacancy in the eyes,
nor the reflection from their depths
of loneliness and cold comfort.

Sitting by your side
I try to take it all in,
pining for what was,
agonizing over what will be.

Then, a light touch on your arm,
a reassuring clasp of your hand,
a gentle caress of your face,
and a soft rubbing of your soles...

and lo!
your eyes light up,
your tightly knitted brow eases,
the creases even out on your face,
and you come to life again.
Then it suddenly dawns on me
that you are not just another chore,
nor just another binding ritual,
but an embodiment of humanity
that calls for the very essence
of my being.

(24 May, 2009)

One Calamity Takes Care of Another

Surprisingly, dear mother,
after you sustained the fracture
the forays to the toilet are over,
the water brash has disappeared,
the restless legs quiet for now,
the back pain all but forgotten
and the aphthous ulcers of decades,
that plagued your existence
are no where in evidence.

Unwittingly, sometimes,
one calamity takes care of another,
like the Kashmiri witticism
you often loved to quote:
A kick in the back
is the best corrective
for a hunchback

(12 June, 2009)

I Can't Thank You Enough

Mother,
I can't thank you enough,
for the many lessons
I am learning at your feet
even as you are confined to bed,
hardly able to communicate.

You mentored me all your life
when you were at your best;
you tutored me throughout,
by example and precept;
and now, when you are laid up,
I am imbibing new lessons
you script each day for me.

The many challenges
that caring for you has thrown my way,
have steeled my resolve evermore
as I juggle between different tasks,
managing time, space and mind.

A lifetime of learning
falls a long way short
of what I imbibe everyday
while minding you,
and the experience serves me well
as I put it to use on my patients
who come to seek my counsel.

Dear mother,
I can't thank you enough,
For, unbeknown to you,
you also serve
even as you suffer.

(3 January, 2010)

Habit

As I walk by your room
I turn my head at your door
to catch a quick glance,
and move on to do my chore.

When I think about it,
I could be passing by
a fixture in the corner
or a painting on the wall
that have been there
ever since I remember –
so intimate, yet so remote.

At other times,
I enter your room,
to feed you,
to change your position,
and tend to your other needs
almost like an automaton,
like I shave or shower myself
out of a lifelong habit,
without much conscious thought.

Then I sit down and wonder:
have you, dear mother,
become just another habit,
or have I pushed all feeling
into a remote corner,
because it hurts bad
to see you wasting away,
because it breaks my heart
to watch an intense life
coming to a dismal end?

(11 April, 2010)

Waiting for the Door to Open

And yet, I eagerly wait
for the door to open,
for someone to enter
and sit by my side.

When you show your face,
I open my mouth by reflex
even before you remind me
that it is tea time
or time for dinner,
for I always find you in a hurry,
and would hate to make you wait.

Other times, you enter
and rush to the wardrobe
to pull out a shirt or a trouser
without sparing a thought for me,
even as I crave
a fleeting touch,
a flying kiss,
or, simply,
a hi.

Then my jaw drops,
my eyes turn away,
and I sink deeper in the bed,
to wait for another chance
when you have the time
to sit a while near me.

(12 April, 2010)

You Went to Bed Hungry

Mother,
for some strange reason
you refused dinner last night
even as I pleaded and cajoled,
and touched your chin in supplication.

You clenched your teeth,
you sealed your lips,
and wouldn't let a morsel
enter your mouth.

Defeated, I turned your side,
tucked you under the quilt
and bid you good night,
believing it was one of those days
when one does not want to eat
for one reason or another.

Soon after,
I lapped up my dinner,
and went to bed
without second thoughts.

Then I had a dream:
I saw you
worrying yourself to death
because I had gone to bed
on an empty stomach
in a fit of teenage temper.

Skipping your own dinner
you chose to stay by my side
to keep watch while I slept.

It was midnight when I woke up
to find you waiting for me.

'Are you hungry?
Would you like to eat a little,
an omelette, may be?'
you asked me endearingly.

You knew I was shy to admit
how ravenously hungry I felt.
Without waiting for an answer,
you hurried to the kitchen
to return with an omelette
on a bowl of steaming rice,
that sent my mouth
into a salivary flood.

I fell on it like a ravenous crow
before I could resist, you know.
A triumphant smile on your lips,
you watched me eat my dinner,
and helped me go to bed again,
to the dreamful sleep
of a fourteen-year-old.

I woke up from the dream,
my heart racing at the thought
that you had missed your dinner,
and that I had left you alone
and gone to sleep
without a scruple or care.

I ran straight to the kitchen
to make your favourite banana shake
and rushed back to your room,

to find you wide awake
to my great relief and joy.

You opened your mouth
as I fed you spoon after spoon
until you wanted no more.
I tucked you back
and bid you goodnight,
as you went to sleep
like a babe.

It is almost fifty-five years
since the incident I dreamt about
actually took place.

Time has come full circle,
as our roles get reversed
and it is my turn now,
but, unlike you,
I have yet to figure out
how to rise to the call
of mothering you,
dear mother.

(14 May, 2010)

Handle Gently

Pray handle me gently, my son;
place me softly on the bed,
rest my legs on a cushion,
turn me slowly to my sides,
fix the pillow under my neck,
and tuck the quilt well under
to keep me warm and secure.

When you come to feed me,
pray do it a little patiently.
If you don't pause long enough
for me to swallow the food,
it crams inside my mouth
and I can't help but choke,
or throw up and make a mess,
even as I try my very best.

Pray give me a kindly look
even if it be in passing;
it doesn't hurt as bad
if you are brusque
as when I sense indifference

I know it is hard on you
when you have to clean me up,
or to carry me to the bathroom
to give me a wash or shower.
But it only takes that extra bit,
and a bit of attitude,
between making a task pleasant
or turning it into a chore.

(15 May, 2010)

Puns and Riddles

Mother,
I have yet to comprehend
the state of your mind;
I have no definition
for your condition;
I am trying to understand
the full nature of your affliction.

Your failure to recognize loved ones
is as inexplicable as life itself;
your enigmatic silences sadden me;
but whatever little you speak
surprises me equally.

Had it been a cognitive decline –
Alzheimer's or dementia of sorts –
could you have retained your ready wit?
Could you have uttered the mantras
and hummed your favourite vaakhs?
Could you have spoken in parables?
Could you have contrived metaphors,
like a poet,
like a mystic?

The other day,
while feeding you tea,
I spilled some on your face
when you remarked gently:
'You have caused a flood,
a storm in a cup of tea.'

Ashamed of my slip-up
I got you another cup,

brewed rather hurriedly,
but when you were done,
you said matter-of-factly:
'That was not tea, my son,
but a poor imitation.'

Another day,
when lunch was late,
you remarked:
'Does anyone care
whether she is alive or dead,
that woman on the bed?'

In an allusion to your hair
that I cut short on purpose
you remarked like an oracle:
'Men have turned into women;
women have become men.'

When I administered the enema
to help you move your bowels,
you soliloquized:
'Poor woman in labour
with her baby stuck
needs someone to help her deliver.'

Last month, when Dida was here,
you pleaded with her in a pun:
'Pray tell your famous brother
to fix the leg of the mare;
poor animal has broken it
through no fault of her.'

(15 June, 2010)

Are You Turning the Tide?

Quietly, the tide seems to have turned;
your appetite has slowly returned,
your choice of food gets wider,
as you ask for one fare or other.

You are more awake than before,
more aware of yourself and us,
as memories appear to come back
and mind that seemed closed
has started opening up again.

You recalled my father's name
first time in the last two years;
you like to sip from the glass
than be fed with a fork or spoon.

I do not know if it is real
or is it my wishful thinking
that your hollows are filling up,
and colour is returning to your face.

Are you finally turning the tide,
to give us a fresh lease of hope?
Are you on course for a longer stint
than we would have imagined?

I recall spotting a glass bottle
the last time I opened your suitcase.
It contained the holy Ganges water
you had ordered from Haridwar.

You had asked me to keep it safe
lest I forget to make you drink it

when the final hour strikes.
Light-heartedly I had asked you:
'How long will water in a bottle
stay clean, dear mother?'
As long as it takes, you replied.
'It might breed vermin,' I said,
'and remain neither clean nor sacred;
neither fit for the living nor the dead.'

And we both laughed our sides out
as I tossed the bottle away.
You were too gracious to make a fuss;
for, even as you were entrenched in faith,
you were equally amenable to reason,
and, I think, you never really believed
that your end was anywhere near.

And now,
whenever I open the refrigerator,
I find the plastic package of Ganga jal
that my siblings brought in good faith
when you took a serious turn
and they came visiting you,
making you drink some of it
and saving the rest for future use.
It has been lurking there like a bad omen,
waiting to be served to you
for the last twenty months!
But I have resolved to cast it away
like the bottle of water
you had ordered from Haridwar.

(20 June, 2010)

You Have Become an Excuse

Mother,
you have become an excuse
for visitors coming at odd hours,
ostensibly to inquire after you,
asking if they could be of help.

They gossip over cups of tea
and get around persuading me
to give them a health check
for complaints imagined or real.

Then they take leave of me,
and, as I walk them to the door,
they suddenly seem to remember
that they had come to visit you.

Embarrassed, they walk back to your room.
They stand near your door
and crane their necks for a look.
They shake their heads and sigh,
and retreat to say good bye.

But how can I accuse them of pretence,
when I have used your confinement
to my own advantage at times?
Like,
when I want to avoid people,
miss a function,
escape a situation.

You become my excuse
as I make myself a martyr
at the altar of service to a mother!

(28 July, 2010)

My Fears

Mother,
it is not much of a task
to hold you safely down on the seat
while we give you a bath,
or to towel your hollows dry
where water remains entrenched,
or to help you put your clothes on
that outgrow you so quickly.

Nor is it a much of a bother
to empty the bags twice a day,
to change the catheter now and then,
to cleanse your bowels on occasion.

My major concern is your mouth,
for you can neither gargle, nor rinse,
nor brush your teeth even once,
nor would you let me do it for you.

Then I am reminded of a queer adage
our teachers would impress on us:
The mouth is dirtier than the anus,
for it harbours lot many pathogens.
And it worries me to death
lest you come down with sores,
lest they are invaded by fungus,
lest you contract cancrum oris.

I can't dismiss my fears,
nor fight off the nightmares,
for doctors tend to imagine the worst

when sickness strikes them
or their loved ones.

And the horrific tales come to mind
that you would relate to us
about such and such a person
long bedridden,
afflicted with intractable sores,
infected and maggot-ridden.

(31 July, 2010)

Life Before and Life After

When they come to visit you
each one has a theory to offer:
'She did no harm to anyone;
why does she have to suffer?'
'There is a purpose in her suffering,
that is beyond anyone's ken.'
'Verily, it is the previous births,
that have come to haunt her....'

Frankly, dear mother,
I am not sure
either about the past births
or the births hereafter,
even as you have been
such a staunch believer.
What I want to understand
is the here and now of life.
What concerns me
is not the purpose of your ordeal
but a way out of it.

If the essence of our nature
is encoded in our genetic architecture,
I fail to understand how
a pedigree in previous life
can now be born a cur,
or a person of virtue in this life
been a sinner in the life before.

(24 August, 2010)

Two Mothers

Mother,
for quite sometime,
I have this strange feeling
as if the woman in the bed,
I have been nursing all through,
is not you,
not the mother I knew all my life,
but someone different.

Then I am seized with
a strange sense of detachment,
as I go through the motions
of cleaning her mouth,
swabbing her eyes,
feeding her,
administering drugs...

But there are occasions
when she opens her eyes wide
and looks me straight in the eye;
when I see a tiny sparkle there
that reminds me that it is *you*,
my mother in flesh and blood,
and it is all the more painful
to realize how you are laid up,
marking time,
as you slowly waste away
and I wring my hands in despair.

(29 October, 2010)

You are Ninety-three

It is your ninety-third birthday,
and grandpa's words resound loud,
and clear as never before:
"What is there to celebrate,
when it is time to cogitate?
Why make such a hullabaloo
to beguile ourselves on birthdays
unless we are happy
to have come a year closer
to the journey's end?"

We reasoned it out with grandfather
that a birthday was a happy occasion,
that, all said and done,
the year had passed off well,
and it was time to take stock
and look forward to the future.

But grandpa laughed his phlegmatic laugh
and bemoaned that he was not sure
that the year that had passed
was much to gloat about,
nor what tomorrow had in store.

Grandpa was not a spoilsport,
neither a sceptic nor misanthrope,
but a sage and a seer in his own right
who had observed life closely
and come to believe
that one day was like another.

Now I realize, dear mother,
one day is like the other for you,

laid up in bed for the third year,
wasting away from day to day,
unaware that it is your birthday.

There was but one birthday greeting
from your well-wishers this year,
but it would be uncharitable to infer
that you have already been forgotten.
For those who would wish you
may have come to comprehend
the truth in grandfather's statement.

You were always special –
the oldest of nine siblings,
a favourite daughter, a revered elder,
a devoted wife, a proud mother,
and a celebrity in your own right.
But old age, sickness, and death
are the great levellers.
They respect neither status, nor pedigree;
they humble all equally.

And now,
when you are ninety-three,
I do not know
whether to celebrate,
or, as grandpa would say,
go some place and cogitate.

(4 December, 2010)

No Cakewalk

When I find you prostrate in bed,
drained of your legendary zest,
mute, motionless and remote,
except the sparkle in your eyes,
I wonder if it is the last glimmer
of a flame that always burned bright,
a grim epilogue to a luminous life,
the beginning of the end.

You must have lost count
of the many battles you fought –
ours and your own –
never losing your nerve,
emerging triumphant every time.
Now I wonder,
was it only to survive
for this mother of all battles –
your own Kurukshetra –
and to lie on a bed of arrows
not just for eighteen days
but two times eighteen months?

But unlike Bishama Pitamaha
you are not blessed with the boon
to call it a day when you will.
Nor is life an easy adversary
to let you have a cakewalk.
Life is a pitiless mercenary,
that exacts its price like Shylock.

Oh, how it breaks my heart
to see you paying that price.

(30 December, 2010)

Bedsore

Mother,
it is two months and more
I am battling your bedsore
that is growing ever more.

Yes, the battle is entirely mine,
while you seem unconcerned,
submitting tamely to my care
without a wail,
without a whimper.

I change the dressings every day,
I look at the sore for a ray of hope,
some sign of repair in the puddle of pus,
as I cleanse and debride the wound
and utter a curse at its doggedness.

Then I remember those chilblains
we suffered as kids every winter,
that would grow into big sores,
and mellow and rupture and ooze pus,
as you steadfastly tended the mess.

I remember with what devotion
you knitted mittens and stockings
for my five siblings and me
and devised your own bandages
when sterile dressings were scarce.

You nursed us through the night
when we squirmed and cried,
holding our feet to your bosom

to lull us to much needed sleep
while you kept a steady vigil.

You dressed our sores day after day
with not an inkling of dismay.
You soothed our wounds all winter
without losing your composure,
till they slowly filled up and healed,
to leave irregular scars behind.

I still carry the scars with me
smooth and shiny, the size of a penny,
emblems of unselfish love
and ungrudging care
that can flow from none other
than the heart of a loving mother.

(3 January, 2011)

Brahman

Mother,
I have forgotten
when I last heard your voice.
I don't remember
when you last smiled at me.

From one day to the next,
I see no emotion in your face;
you wear the same expression,
remote and unfathomable.

It is not one of recognition,
nor of curiosity.
It is not of pain,
nor of pleasure.
It is neither a plaint,
nor a complaint.

You are neither in thought,
nor in trance.
You are neither drowsy,
nor alert.
You are neither fully awake,
nor fully asleep.

Mother,
I don't know
how to describe you,
for you are
neither this, nor that, nor that,

and yet
you are....

Yes, you are, for me,
the transcendent reality,
beyond shape or substance,
beyond emotion or cognition,
beyond any definition.

(12 January, 2011)

Your Ring Slipped Off

Mother,
you seem to be unaware
that your ring fell off
while I washed your face
and changed your dress.

It is the wedding ring
embossed with his name
that father slipped into your finger
when you took the marriage vows
and walked the seven steps together.

That was way back in the thirties,
and the ring never left your finger
as you also held on fondly
to the bangles and earrings,
the *dejhour* and necklace.

Oh, how they adorned your form,
how they dangled and jingled
when you did your everyday chores!

But when you started losing flesh,
the bangles would slide across,
sometimes up to the armpits,
often getting stuck there.
Without you knowing,
with a sadness in my heart,
I removed them one day
lest they strangle your arm.

Your *dejhours* too got in the way
when we would change your dress.

Reluctantly, I threaded them off your ears
and stored them away.
It was the same with the necklace
that I replaced with a light chain.

But I did not have the heart
to remove the wedding ring
as it trekked freely
up and down your finger.
Now it feels like a bad omen
to have fallen on its own.

I know you must miss them all
even in your state of oblivion.
I know how it must offend you
to feel your arms and neck bare
when your hand instinctively seeks
the missing ornaments there.

And now, dear mother,
shorn of these trammels,
here you are,
like a naked fakir!
All that you wear
is a cap, a frock,
and a diaper.

Makes me wonder,
what trappings does it take
to keep the heart beating
and the lungs breathing?
What all does one require
to keep body and soul together?

(12 February, 2011)

Doing Me a Favour

Mother,
while we go about our chores
from one day to another,
problems crop up in your care
that we manage somehow or the other.

But there are times
when they come down hard
like hailstones on a bare head,
when I fear a burnout
and feel like running away –
from you,
from the world,
from myself.

Then I remember your words:
'Every time you swear at a task
it will swear back at you
and make it more insufferable.
Rather than curse it
face it, my son;
sing a song of abandon;
whistle like a kid
frisking merrily to the playground
unknown to the cares of the world.'

That advice has stood me well,
and when in dire straits
I imagine taking a lazy stroll
in the sleepy Gulmarg meadow,
the lofty mountain peaks
shimmering in the setting sun

and the long shadows of the pines
weaving a mesmerizing pattern.

I tend to you in that spirit,
lithe and blithe,
carefree and tranquil.

It is then that peace descends
of a restful night
after a hard day's toil.
It is then I feel
that you are doing me a favour
every time you pose a problem,
to make me sing a song of abandon.

(20 May, 2011)

Convulsions

When the night nurse reported
that your body had tensed
and your gaze was oddly fixed
I rushed near you to find out.

Your head had turned left
and the eyes as well,
the gaze fixed on the wall,
looking beyond,
perhaps not looking at all.

The spell was over soon after,
and I dismissed it from my mind
even with the certain knowledge
that it was a versive seizure,
and likely to recur.

I even beguiled myself
that it was not at all a seizure,
for it was painful to acknowledge
that you had been struck
with yet another disorder,
as if your plate was not full
and already brimming over.

It was only a wishful thought,
for barely ten minutes later,
you came down with a major fit –
your head turning,
your eyes rolling,
your face twitching,
your limbs jerking,

your back arching,
your mouth frothing.

Oh, what a distortion it made
of your lovely face,
leaving me helpless and in disgrace,
unable to access your vein
to give you a shot of diazepam
before you convulsed all over
and let out a cry
that pierced my heart!

I have no count of seizures
that I have treated all my life;
no count of the times
I have given intravenous shots;
but it seemed now
as if I were handling a seizure
first time in my life!

Oh, what must be the trigger
that drove your neurons crazy!
What currents must have flown,
what sparks flashed,
to produce this devastating spell
that bit and bled your tongue,
warped your body,
and left you drained of all energy,
pushing you into a comatose state
from which you are yet to awake
after a whole night's wait.

(2 June, 2011)

What Use Life?

Mother,
I cannot bear
to watch you melting away
in the smouldering fire
of sickness and age.

It pains me to see
your fragile frame quaked
by recurrent convulsions,
your gentle pride humbled
through tubes and catheters,
and your identity reduced
to our futile ministrations.

What a shame
that you,
who lived a life so noble and pure,
and indulged any one
that came to your door,
now wait like a beggar
for the final hour.

What an irony,
that you,
who breathed life into others,
now struggle for each single breath!

Oh, what use is life
that has been bartered away
for a bed, a spoon, and a catheter?

(10 June, 2011)

What Difference Does It Make?

Oh, how you loved life,
loved it in its fullness,
always despairing of sickness,
imagining the worst scenarios,
recounting the horrid tales
of people known to you
who had gone through
the travails of old age,
of debility and disease.

But when you realized
the grim scenarios made us sad,
you readily cheered us up:
'You shouldn't feel dejected
by the hard realities of life.
How we fare in our lives
is as much in destiny's hands
as in the way we treat ourselves.
But I have no reason to agonise
for I have six loving children,
three of you doctors of medicine.
Besides, I have the consolation
that you are always there, my son.'

Yes, dear mother,
three of us are doctors,
all married to doctor spouses,
which makes us six –
each specialized in our fields.
But in the final analysis,
does all the knowledge and experience

make much of a difference
when faced with remorseless ageing
and creeping sickness
that now seems to mock
my utter helplessness?

(20 June, 2011)

Za`l Po`or, Ma`l Po`or, Tu` Koth

Looking at you, dear mother,
I hear the echo of that prayer
old people would always make:
za`l po`or, ma`l po`or, tu` koth –
control on the bowel and bladder,
and power to the knees
to stand the weight of age.

When I was a child
the words made no sense to me
and I even laughed at the plea.

When I grew up
I never fathomed
the full import
of that fervent prayer.

I got some hang of it
when I began my career
and became so familiar
with this enabling prayer
from my older patients.

But it is only now,
when you have to depend on me
for all these functions,
that I realize what a smart prayer
these six simple words make,
and how it powerfully sums up
the existential crisis
of sickness and old age.

(22 June, 2011)

Learning the Hard Way

Down the years,
I strove hard not to lose my nerve
while battling the many afflictions
that beset you from time to time.

But now, a demon has incarnated
in the shape of a decubitis ulcer
that bares its ugly fangs
and mocks my utter failure
to match its vicious sway.

Creeping on your backside,
it grows larger and angrier
attaining a fiendish black hue,
wearing a mask of greenish slough
that is so hard to clear away.
Nothing seems to help –
neither the dressings
nor the debridements;
neither the antibiotics
nor the ointments.

Inexorably, it grows upon you,
and upon my consciousness too,
daring me during the day,
haunting me at night,
sharpening its fangs,
challenging both of us
to a last-ditch battle.

There is no flesh or fat left
between your skin and sacrum

where it crouches like a beast,
baring the bone underneath.

But it amazes me much
how quietly you endure
as you patiently submit
to my forceps and scissors,
while I try my best
to cut and clear away
the pus and debris.

You neither cry nor whimper,
as if detached from your body,
while I bite my lips and grind my teeth
even as I try to dismiss from my mind
that you are my very own mother
as I ply the knife and the scissor.

Through your silent suffering,
you teach me the hard way,
steeling my nerves everyday,
raising the paradigm of kinship
between a son and his mother
to a yet higher plane.

(25 June, 2011)

There Has To Be More

I have come on a short visit
across time, space and cultures;
jet lags, kisses and embraces,
and...tears.

It is a hot sweltering morning,
my heart beating heavy
to the melancholic strain of farewell,
my feet dragging, I enter your room
to find you crumpled in the bed,
entangled in tubes and catheters,
your silvery hair jetting out,
eyes opening to a vacuous gaze,
a frail body, a quiescent mind,
silent the songs you sang to us,
distant the memory of your laughter...

With my quivering hand
I touch your skinny cheeks
and pass my finger
along your bushy eyebrows,
and lo!
your eyes open wide
and look into mine.
"What next; Grandma?"
I ask, like old times
when you would stop awhile
while you narrated the stories
from the epics and scriptures,
holding us spellbound.
"*This is where it ends, my little one.*"
"It can't be," I remonstrate;

"there has to be more".
Your eyes close.

I shudder to think
it could be the final goodbye
and there would be
no more stories for us.

(15 July, 2011)

Celebrations Galore

Mother,
as we grapple with
the challenges of care giving,
every time I tackle one
it becomes a celebration.

I burst into a song each morning
when you open your glued eyes
to give me your benign look
after I have cleared the exudates
and rinsed them with water.

I break into a jig
to find your catheter in place
and no leaks whatsoever
while I change your diaper.

I rejoice with a swig of beer
after I have given you a bath,
changed your dress,
and combed your hair.

I celebrate with a sip of wine
when you eat your dinner
without hiccups,
without spilling over.

It has been a run of celebrations
one after the other
these three years
since you took to bed,
dear mother.

(20 July, 2011)

Moksha

As it grows bigger and bigger,
opening its jaws like a serpent
spewing purulence and fetid odour,
you seem to have submitted yourself
to this raging monster
we call the decubitis ulcer.

Even as you look toxic,
your brow has smoothened out,
your clenched fingers have opened,
your crouched frame has straightened,
and you have assumed a serene air
of total resignation.

But your indifference
runs counter to my turbulence;
your legendary endurance
matches my feverish impatience;
and even as my heart bleeds
to watch you bide your time,
I don't find the look in your eyes
which would tell me
that you are tired waiting.

Yes, dear mother,
there is no sign whatever
that you are waiting
for the Dharmaraja –
the curer of all the maladies
of the body, mind and spirit.

You make the Dharmaraja
wait for you.

(9 August, 2011)

Note: Dharmaraja—the Lord of death.

The Poison Cup of Longevity

Mother,
sometimes I wonder:
By having won the war
against the big adversaries
isn't science paving the way
for remorseless ageing –
the slow attrition,
the degeneration,
the inexorable decay?

Isn't longevity
exacting its price of humans,
through the many afflictions of age –
visual decline and hearing deficits,
knock knees and crooked backs,
wobbly gaits and perilous postures,
Parkinson's and Alzheimer's,
and the dreaded cancers
that dig and burrow,
and gnaw and nibble
and kill many times over?

No, my dear,
I am in no mood
for a long tempestuous affair
with this temptress.

I would hate to cling on to a life
riddled with the stigmata of age.
I want my heart to beat strong,
not plod on barely to survive;
my lungs to expand slow and deep,
not just pant for each breath;

my mind to be clear and sharp,
not hang around in oblivion.
I want to savour my food,
not gulp it down just to survive;
I want control on my sphincters
and not a shaming incontinence.
I want to walk to the very end,
not wobble, hobble and stumble.

O fate,
give me a flash death!
Give me a heart attack,
or a fell stroke!
Give me a fatal accident,
or a lightning bolt!
Pray spare me
the poison cup of longevity.

(30 August, 2011)

The Last Supper

Your breathing is hard and furious
your pulse fast and reckless,
your looks pale and cadaverous,
your feet cold and oedematous.
The rattle in your throat
makes me nervous,
as you lie in stupor,
with no movement whatever.

Your lips open no longer
to the touch of the spoon;
we feed you a morsel
but it spills over.
Am I watching over
your last supper,
dear mother?

Each battle is different
in this epic war
that has been going on
for three long years.
Kurukshetra pales in comparison,
and all the warriors there
seem like your pale shadows.

You fought each adversary
ever so valiantly.
Now it seems to me
you are all set
for the mother of all battles,
to release your immortal soul
from the shackles of the body.

(5 September, 2011)

Go Mother, Go

Go mother, go;
unchain yourself
from all your maternal bonds,
for I quite well know,
you hold on to the last straw
not because you desire to live on,
but that I may not be orphaned.

Go mother, go;
for the love of me, go.
How long can I take
the mutilation of your body,
the desecration of your self,
the battering of your spirit.

Go mother, go;
release yourself once for all
from this relentless onslaught
that defiles your tender form
and scorches your sacred flesh.
Break free
from the clutches of the bed.
Fly like a free bird
in the vast blue sky.

Go mother, go,
do not tarry any longer.
With a hand on my heart,
a smile on my face,
and tears in my eyes,
I am ready to say good byes.

(6 September, 2011)

You Rallied

Mother,
belying my worst fears,
you have rallied,
and given us a fresh lease of hope.
You seem determined
to bless us as long as you can
even as you endure
one crisis after another.

Each day comes as a bonus,
each hour is precious;
who cares if it be arduous?
What would life be worth
sans pain and distress?
Does any one remember a life
that has escaped the fire test?

And, what is the rush to go
when there is time, my son,
to sip a few more drops
and swill the last draught?
Let me savour it slowly;
one can die but only once.

(7 September, 2011)

Section Three—Silences

Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It is the transition that is troublesome.

(Isaac Asimov)

The Final Bow

We woke up,
bleary eyed, yet fresh,
to find you in the state
we left you last night
when you gave us a fright.

Was it to spare us a long vigil
and allow us some more sleep
that you kept Yama at bay
and braved another perilous night?

Oh, how fierce and deadly
must the combat have been
as you must have struggled
for each single breath,
and striven for each heartbeat,
to give us enough time
for a rare farewell.

You gave us enough time
to recite verses from the Gita.
You waited to hear
the Lord's profound sermon
that you oft loved to recite
with unmatched devotion:
The soul is unborn and eternal,
neither dried by wind
nor burnt by fire,
neither cut by a weapon
nor wet by water…
and, I would like to add:

neither tarnished by age,
nor defiled by disease.

You rallied for another hour
until we activated the Skype
to let your loved ones
living in different continents
see you face to face.
They sighed and sobbed
and they cried in farewell,
while you held on valiantly,
drawing upon the last shreds
of your flagging energy.

Then, darkness fell abruptly,
the Skype went blank,
a loud hush descended,
and life came to a standstill.

Time froze after ninety-three years,
but even in your passing away
you did not disappoint anyone;
you gave the last audience
to all your children.
You blessed them
as you took the final bow.

(8 September, 2011: 8.30 A.M.)

Propitious Time for Passing Away

I don't know how the news broke,
how people started pouring in,
filling up the veranda and the lawn,
while we laid you on dried grass
spread on your bedroom floor,
and lit a *diya* near your head.

I don't know who got the bier,
who brought the flowers,
who fished out the shroud
you had saved in your suitcase,
who got all the *samigiri*,
for your funeral?

I have no idea
who summoned the priest,
and how different people
assigned themselves
different tasks.

It all seemed choreographed
as we moved about like actors,
playing our roles,
in bidding you farewell,
dear mother.

'It is an auspicious day,
the eleventh moon of *Bhadra*,'
I heard the priest say.
Looking at me with empathy
he made a solemn declaration

that eight-thirty in the morning,
when you breathed your last,
was a very propitious hour.

What a consolation, dear mother,
that, now, there is nothing to fear
about your onward journey
from here!
I had heard a lot about
the favourable positions of the stars
for a propitious time of birth,
but I never knew
there could also be
a perfect time and day
for passing away!

(8 September, 2011)

The Funeral

To the chanting of prayers,
we shifted you gingerly
from the wooden plank
and laid you onto the bier.

We spread the shawl on you
that you had saved for the day.
We threw the canopy
of a large saffron sheet
to drape the bier.
We gathered in circles around you
and chanted mantras and hymns
to the showering of flowers
and the tolling of bells.
We sang the *aarti* clear and high
and raised our eyes to the sky;
we recited the final funeral prayer
and lent our shoulders to the bier.

Then, to the sounding of a conch,
we started towards the crematorium
chanting the profound mantra:
Khemtayoni apradha
Shiv Shiv Shiv bo
Shri Mahadev Shamboo –
O Shiva, O Mahadeva, O Shamboo
forgive us our sins.

(8 September, 2011)

Chandala

Mother,
when I was a child
I would beg of you
to narrate the story again and again
of Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra
and his ill-fated wife and son.

Oh, how sad we felt
when the righteous king
was forced to abandon his kingdom
and mortgage himself to a chandala
for fulfilling a solemn vow.

Oh, how we cried together
when, thrown by destiny
into a binding moral contract,
he was compelled to demand wages
from his impoverished wife
for cremating his own little son!

I would often ask myself:
Why is a chandala so reviled
for living off the dead?

Isn't it such an unpleasant task
to put the dead on the pier,
to sprinkle ghee and butter
and burn the mortal remains
of people unknown to him?

Isn't it the chandala
who finally sets the soul free

by this act of kindness
to a dead body?

But I could never imagine then
that a chandala would visit
my own mother one day
to reveal a different face.

Before he placed you
onto the bed of firewood,
the chandala removed the shawl
you were draped in
with the finesse of a magician,
folding it away with alacrity,
handing it over to his assistant
as if we would snatch it from him.

Feeling ashamed on his behalf,
I quietly swallowed the insult.

Then, with lightning speed,
he unhooked the chain from your neck
and tossed it to his assistant
in a cavalier manner,
as if it were a booty.

I swallowed another draught
of his terrible insolence.

But what followed was a sacrilege,
an insult to the living
and to the dead.
He peered at your shrouded body
for more pickings elsewhere,
and proceeded to search your ears.

Your right earring had fallen off
several months back,
but the left one was so fastened,
I knew it wouldn't be easy
to dislodge it from your ear
as he set to unscrewing it.

I shrank in horror
when he ordered his assistant
to get him the pliers
that he may prise it open.

'No, please, don't,' I crowed,
piqued at this irreverence,
'you can retrieve the ring
after the cremation is over?'
"But, it will smelt in the fire,
and lose all its worth, sir," said he.
'That is how it has to be,'
I said severely.

He looked at me unabashedly,
his fingers busy with your ear,
and before I could say anything,
he had the earring in his palm
that he pocketed in a trice,
giving me a triumphant look.

I heaved a sigh of relief,
and had no heart to ensure
that he hadn't harmed your ear,
even as he used his bare hands
and not the pair of pliers.

Soon I lit the pyre
and the fire took over,

the flames leaping high,
burning away
all the bruises and blemishes,
reducing to ashes
all the hurts and humiliations,
as also the chandala's shenanigans.

(Crematorium, 8 September, 2011: 4.30 P.M.)

Gathering the Ashes

The *chita* was still smouldering
when we visited the crematorium
twenty-four hours later,
to gather the ashes
before the sun would set.

We sprinkled water on the ashes
as vapours smelling of slaking lime
sizzled up to make a statement:
From the *panchbutas* I materialized,
to the *panchbutas* I return again,
in the eternal cycle
of living and dying.

Raking the ashes carefully,
I looked for the *asthis*,
picking them up one by one,
delivering them into an urn,
above all, securing the axis,
that defies the fire
to retain its Siva-like figure.

I gathered the ashes into a sac,
smeared the ground with sterile mud,
and circumambulated around the site
sanctified by your mortal remains.

Then, carrying your sacred relics,
I made a reverential bow
and hurried away
without looking back.

I wouldn't let *shamshan vairagya*
take hold of me,
for you always taught me
to face life with courage
and to live it in its entirety.

(Crematorium, 9 September, 2011: 7 P.M.)

Notes:
Chita – Funeral pyre.
Asthis – The burnt down bones.
Panchbutas – The five elements, viz. earth, air, water, sky, and fire.
Shamshan vairagya – An acute sense of remorse
and renunciation that one is seized with at the crematorium.

The Immersion

(1)

I know, dear mother,
you would have much liked
to go back to the river
you revered like a mother.
I remember how
you immersed your hands in her,
thrilled by the feel of the current
as the boat pulled upstream
whenever we sailed
to your father's house.

But Vitasta is a far cry from here;
twenty years is a long time
since we were separated from her;
and you know as much as I,
she has turned into a wailing river,
stained with the blood of innocents
since violence broke out in Kashmir.

Is it a mere coincidence, then,
that the Chenab in her fullness
is waiting to receive you,
dear mother?
Besides, does it really matter
which river is privileged
to receive your ashes
when all the rivers
end up in the ocean?

(2)

We had to wait five days
to let the *Panchak* pass.
Thursday followed *Panchak*,
and we let it pass too.
I can't understand why
Panchak is inauspicious –
and sometimes Thursdays as well –
both for the living and the dead.
When a job needs done,
pray how can one day be
less auspicious than the other?
And yet, I have waited six days
for the immersion of your ashes,
for you were a stickler to tradition
even as you were open to reason.

(3)

From the sac filled with ashes
we scooped out three portions
to be saved into three packets,
and let the rest of your remains
flow into the swirling river.

Of the three packets of ashes
Baiji will take one along
on his way to Australia,
to immerse it in the Pacific
where you had touched the ocean
and worshipped the rising sun
when you visited him
along with dear father.

Bodhji will immerse his portion
in his part of the ocean

where you prayed
when you stayed with him
at the California bay.

As for the third,
I am going to mix your ashes
with the dust of my flowerbeds.
I will grow daffodils and narcissus
that you may always stay with us.
Come spring, and you will bloom,
and envelope me like always
in your divine fragrance.

(Akhnoor, the right bank of Chenab,
16 September, 2011)

Note:
Panchak – It is a period of five days every month when the moon transits through Aquarius and Pisces. It is believed to be inauspicious for starting a new venture, and for some death rituals.

Tenth Day

Dear mother,
if you recall our long dialogues,
I would often express my qualms
about the various rituals
that guide our daily lives,
especially the *karma kanda*
that seems so unwieldy
and out of tune with the times.

But let me admit,
the morning ceremony today
on the left bank of the Canal
was a deeply emotional experience.

We seated ourselves early
on the paved steps of the *ghat* –
Baiji, Bodhji and me –
while people started pouring in
for this last farewell to you.

Oh, how sorely we missed Baisahab,
your first-born son,
whose health wouldn't permit
the long run from London.

The priest quickly set about
tracing the symbolic patterns,
reciting hymns and mantras,
and rolling rice balls,
that we filled in a decked pot
along with herbs and flowers.

To the chanting of mantras,
we let the pot sail
in the swirling stream,
watching it disappear at the bend –
a tiny ship
on a lone voyage
into the unknown.

Then the barber took over
to give us each a clean shave.
(In homage to you
we had grown beards
for the ten days of mourning).
In a minor departure,
we opted for a short haircut
in place of the ritual tonsure.

We had a few dips in the river,
and changed into a white dress –
kurta, pyjama, and Gandhi cap –
and flip-flops for the feet.
It was like a total makeover,
like having taken a new birth,
or starting a new chapter in life,
now that you had enveloped us
in the absence of your presence.

We ascended the steps of the ghat
to be received by people
who stood sombrely
arrayed in a U
for the final adieu.

Starting from one limb of the U
the three of us walked in tandem,
filing past each one of them,

thanking them with folded hands,
as they folded theirs in return,
with no words spoken,
their solemn sympathetic looks
making us choke with emotion.

That was the moment of truth,
as it suddenly dawned on me,
for the first time in ten days,
that I had been orphaned,
that all the eyes gathered there
were looking at a motherless son.

(17 September, 2011)

Note:
Karma kanda – The Hindu rituals.

Charity and Memorabilia

From your closets and suitcases
I retrieved all the effects
that you had saved
to be given away –
the boat to ferry you across,
the *kangri* to keep you warm,
the cow for your daily milk,
and other paraphernalia
to steer you through the last lap
of your long march to eternity.

We gave away in charities
all your earthly possessions;
we left nothing with us
except your memories,
and your favourite refrain:
Alone and empty-handed we come,
alone and empty-handed we go,
vacating the space we had taken
for the next arrival,
and the next,
on the stage of life.

I have retained your comb, though,
and your nail clipper as well –

the comb as a reminder
of a profanity I committed
when I cut your hair short;
and the nail clipper
as an emblem of my failure
to clip the horny nails of your big toes
that stuck out and pointed at me
even as I was I giving you
the last bath.

(21 September, 2011)

The Certificate

On the face of it, dear mother,
with the arrival of the Certificate
from the city municipal office,
the last chapter of your life
has closed officially today.

We had no official records
of births and deaths in Kashmir
in the era you were born,
but we had the horoscopes
diligently done by the priests
who recorded the exact time of birth,
the minute, the hour and the day,
and the exact position of the stars,
the sun, the moon and the planets.

The horoscopes encapsulated all –
our past, present and future –
and they were supposed to foresee
the course of our life's journey
even as I believed in them but little
for they made no sense to me.

I believed not in the predictions
that the priests made from them
after painstaking calculations,
and certainly not in the prescriptions
that they readily offered

to tide over a bad patch,
or to avert a tragedy in the making.

I believed destiny would run its course
in spite of the grim forecasts,
in spite of the prayers and penance;
and you proved me right, dear mother,
even as you were a staunch believer
in these scrolls of hand-written paper
that you preserved with such care.

You never got a certificate in life
notwithstanding your many talents,
nor do I know of what use to you
this document from the municipality,
for your history does not end with it,
nor did it begin with your birth
three and ninety years ago.

I recall, Lord Krishna's sermon,
that you loved to recite so often:
There never was a time
you were not;
there never will be a time
you will not be.

(22 September, 2011)

Speaking Through Silence

Dear mother,
I am breaking my silence,
the silence that chokes me
ever since you passed away,
filling my world with silences.

The unforgettable dialogues
that ran between you and me
stopped finally
when you shed your earthly garb,
leaving me utterly to myself,
to my inner silence.

Life lost its lure
the day you took to bed,
yet you strove to live on –
for my sake;
you went through purgatory –
for my sins.

A year has gone by;
there is a strange feeling
as if it were yesterday,
but when I measure it
by the weight of the silence
it feels like an eternity.

All that is left with me
is your enormous absence
that keeps me company
morning and evening,
waking and sleeping.
I let it hold my hand

as you would
when I was a child,
and we walk together in silence
without the need for a dialogue.

Mother,
you have not flown away;
you have been with me all along –
through your absence.
We have been speaking
with each other –
through our silence.

(On your first anniversary, 8 September, 2012)



Mother and Son (Year 2005)

The Final Frontier

Dialogues between Mother and Son

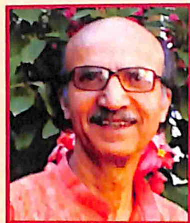
*"Memories are the soul's ambrosia;
they are our lifetime savings
in the safe deposit of our minds,
true friends we can fall back upon
when we need them most....
They are our connect with the past,
and there is no present sans past."*

*

*"Decay is encoded in the seed
that has yet to sprout into life;
Everything that is born
has to wither away and die;
Life is a chance in a million
but death is a certainty."*

What started as a personal journal of the author engaged in care giving to his sick, aged mother, evolved into a dialogue and contemplation on life and death, ageing and decay, faith and skepticism—subjects that have intrigued and mystified humans for ever. Through flashbacks into the past and the existential challenges of the present, the dialogues progressed to the final frontier.

This collection of poems captures the poignancy of ageing, the challenges of care giving, the fear of losing a beloved parent, the inevitability of death and the visions of the hereafter.



K L Chowdhury is a medical professional of repute and an award winning writer, with three published anthologies, a travelogue, and two short story collections. His collection of short stories *Faith and Frenzy* has been widely acclaimed. His poems, essays, memoirs and short stories have appeared in various national and international journals.



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